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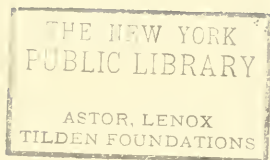
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**THE YOUTH OF
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY**





THE RILEY YOUTH AT FOURTEEN
Pencil drawing by himself

THE YOUTH OF JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

*Fortune's way with the Poet from
Infancy to Manhood*

By
MARCUS DICKEY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS PAINTED
UNDER THE POET'S DIRECTION

By WILL VAWTER

AND REPRODUCTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS,
DAGUERREOTYPES, LETTERS AND
RARE DOCUMENTS

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*Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel,
Turn thy wild wheel
Through sunshine, storm and cloud;
Smile and we smile,
The lords of many lands;
Frown and we smile,
The lords of our own hands;
For man is man
And master of his fate.*

—ALFRED TENNYSON.

FOREWORD

When Cromwell sat to Sir Peter Leley, he said, "I desire you will use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all those roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me."

This famous injunction Riley quoted to a reporter who sought his opinion on biography. The poet had read it, for the first time, when a youth, in the preface to a rare and much loved set of old books entitled *British Painters and Sculptors*. To a writer who came to him for a sketch of his life, he said, "Don't take sides with conflicting opinions about me; don't strive to write me up or down; tell the facts." He went on to talk of Boswell. "They have called him a conceited fool," said he, "but he was of as much benefit to literature as Johnson himself. He put things down as they *were*, and for once we have the charming chronicle of a life without the weakness of apology."

To the author of this volume, the poet said: "There is a Chemistry in Nature that is making the worst good and the best better. To this end a biographer may give scars the treatment distance gives them in the landscape; he may soften or spiritualize them—but never ignore them." In a word, the golden rule was this: *speaking the truth in love*.

Evidently the above observations suggest a sympathetic, lovable book; but it is one thing to receive suggestions, another and altogether different thing to carry them out. The author does not claim to have done this, but he does claim while doing his work to have had the poet's ideals uppermost in mind. By breaking away, to some extent, from "the dull

FOREWORD

order of chronology" and by the liberal use of anecdote, he hopes the narrative has gained in variety and interest. In ways incalculable he is indebted to others, and chiefly to the poet, who made numerous corrections in the records and cordially approved all efforts to arrive at the truth through them. To all who have thus generously assisted him, the gratitude of the author is given without reservation.

The poet's life, as he saw it, was divided into two periods: Youth and Maturity—the latter carrying with it the idea of wrestling with and solving manhood's problems—the former roughly covering the first thirty years of his life, but often mantling with its fervor the period far beyond. Youth was the spring and summer of his fortunes; Maturity the autumn and winter. Age was unnecessary. "Youth," he was wont to repeat, "is the mainspring of the world." If he could be enrolled among the Eternal Boys, that was fame enough.

Out of college halls, city workshops, and wayside cottages, have come hosts of Riley readers who have thought and who still think of him as a living friend because he sang of living things. Recalling the tribute of their love, the author can not conceal the lively hope that this chronicle of their friend by their friend may find a genial corner in their good opinions.

THE AUTHOR.

Heart of the Highlands,
Nashville, Indiana,
June, 1919.

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THE YOUTH OF
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley

CHAPTER I

A GLIMPSE OF THE EARLY DAYS

IT WAS *the tide of migration*; what the Red Man called the White Man's Flood—youth, commerce and trade, visions of wealth, the arts, sowing and reaping, faith, hope and love, following the Great Western Pioneer, the sun. Rising from the shores of the British Isles and the continent of Europe, it crossed the Atlantic and fringed the seaboard of a new world with cities and farms. It ascended the eastern slopes of the mountains, poured through the gates of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies, and swept through the forests and over the prairies of the Ohio Valley.

What was its character? Who were the emigrants? They were not one people, not a family of single extraction from one motherland. They were Frenchmen and Englishmen, Dutch, Irish, and Scotchmen, descendants of Puritans and cavaliers, gentlemen from Virginia, artisans from Pennsylvania and students from New England. There were woodmen, sturdy swains, and delvers with the spade; pedestrians, riders, and revelers—and felons, not multitudes of them such as the motherland once sent to Australia, but a sufficient number to be an important

factor in the structure of states. There were soldiers ever ready to hurry to the charge, and orators who swayed the multitude with impassioned speech. There came also musicians. In the new land as in the old, the four essentials were food, clothing, shelter and recreation. Over the mountains "with the cooking pots and pails" came the fiddle and banjo. There were the forefathers of sculptors and painters, and

"Of poets pacing to and fro,
Murmuring their sounding lines";

particularly the ancestors of a poet of simple life, the central figure in the succeeding chapters of this volume. It was a race of men with their backs turned upon the sea, "civilization frayed at the edges," a master historian has said, "taken forward in rough and ready fashion, with a song and a swagger, by woodsmen and drovers, with axes and whips and rifles in their hands." Hundreds among the thousands who came were disappointed. Many returned, but the large majority remained, "built cabins, planted crops, cultivated farms, founded towns and cities, and established a new empire."

Of the land to which they came it may be said that in expanse and grandeur it surpassed all other wonderlands of the temperate zone. The Forest of Arden in which the imagination of Shakespeare reveled was a brushwood in comparison. Such mammoth trees the eye of man had seldom seen. It was a rich land. Daniel Boone, looking out over it, was "richer than the owners of cattle on a thousand hills." But its wealth could not be measured by the hunter's eye. It was a primeval region many hundred leagues in circumference. From east to west it equaled the distance

traversed by Stanley in his march to the Mountains of the Moon. But how great the contrast. The Stanley region was in the darkest corner of the earth, brooding under the eternal storm-clouds of the equator. The masses of forest vegetation suggested mystery and awe. Not so the American woods. As the African explorer said of them, "There was poetic seclusion, graceful disorder, bits of picturesque skies, and the sun shedding softened streams of light on scenes of exhaustless beauty and wonder." The scenes were vocal with the songs of streams and birds. Breezes whispered their gentle mysteries to the trees, and mighty winds made music in the forest like

"The roar of Ocean on his winding shore."

It was a midway region, exempt alike from the severity of the Canadian winters and the enervating summer heat of the Gulf coast. The kingdom of nature—the seasons, morning, noon, evening, and the silence of night—surpassed the splendors of the Orient; and when Indian summer came to fold the land in sympathetic sleep, there came with it a vision of perfection that rivaled dreams of the Golden Age. "The world of childhood," wrote William Dean Howells, whose boyhood was a part of it, "the childhood of that vanished West, which lay between the Ohio and the Mississippi, and was, unless memory abuses my fondness, the happiest land that ever there was under the sun."

In such a land it was less difficult for men and women to order their lives on a comprehensive scale, and they began to do that. Their dreams and deeds, in part, corresponded to their surroundings. They loved youth. "They lived freely with powerful unedu-

cated persons. They loved the earth, the sun and the animals; despised riches, hated tyrants, and took off their hats to no man nor any number of men." They were transformed by the rough fortunes of the frontier, and in the passing of the years a poet was born to celebrate the transformation—a poet of the people with poems, said Mark Twain, "as sweet and genuine as any that his friends, the birds and bees, make about his other friends, the woods and flowers."

There was another side to the picture of the West, the West as seen one lovely April by Charles Dickens, then a young novelist of thirty, who came down the Ohio River in a steamboat and hurried through the region from Cincinnati to Lake Erie, in a stage-coach. Ohio and Indiana were in the making; Cincinnati, lying in its amphitheater of hills, commended itself to the novelist favorably and pleasantly. The way out of the city led through a beautiful, cultivated country rich in the promise of an abundant harvest. Soon however the scene changed. Roadside inns were dull and silent. There were the primitive worm-fence, the unseemly sight of squalid huts, wretched cabins, broken-down wagons, and shambling, low-roofed cowsheds. Villagers stared idly at the passengers and sent up a silly shout when the coach bumped against the stumps in the street. Loafers lounged around the country stores, the climate was pernicious and everywhere were signs of ill health and depression.

Beyond were miles upon miles of forest solitudes "unbroken by any sign of human life or any trace of human footsteps"—then to come suddenly upon a clearing with black stumps strewn about the field, to find settlers burning down the trees, the charred and blackened giants of the wood lying like so many "mur-

dered creatures" on the earth—it was a scene to excite the traveler's compassion. His mind reverted to a former age when mighty forest trees spread their roof over a land enchanted, an aboriginal age when men lived pleasantly in blessed ignorance of the destruction and miseries of the White Man's Flood.

That branch of the tide of migration which Dickens saw lacked diversity of character. The emigrants were hollow-cheeked and pale, silent, joyless and unsocial. The women were drowsy; the men seemed "melancholy ghosts of departed bookkeepers." Had he left the stage-coach and lived for a space with the settlers, had he gone with them to husking-bees, barn-raising and log-rollings, he would have found robust constitutions and an abundance of joy and laughter. Among those who lived on corn bread, boiled ham and cabbage, he would have found many who saw the beauty in the rainbow, in the thunder-storm and the sunset. And gratitude for literature he would have found also. John Hay relates that early settlers in Kentucky saddled their horses and rode from neighboring counties to the principal post-town whenever a new Waverley novel was expected. Among the old books scattered here and there in the log cabins of Indiana and Ohio, Dickens would have found a new one, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, which then contained the story of Little Nell, whose life found an echo in the brief histories of domestic joys and sorrows of the frontier. Among those who idolized this heroine of fiction was Elizabeth Marine, who a few years later became the mother of a child of song whose mission was to make glad the people with poetry wrought from the very things that had filled the heart of Dickens with discontent. As the south wind warms winter

into spring, as the sun turns the sod to violets, so was this child of song to transmute the homeliness of those early days into beauty. Things were unsightly when the novelist passed. There was to be loveliness and harmony when the singer came.

It was a desire of Sir Walter Scott to stand in the midst of a wild original American forest "with the idea of hundreds of miles of untrodden forest around him," in the vast region stretching westward from the Alleghanies, for example. Such was the good fortune of those families who first settled in the woods of Randolph County, Indiana. Geographically they were in the very heart of the region. Leading back from those settlements, as indeed from settlements in every county, were threads of genealogy, which, if not paramount in importance, nevertheless gave color to subsequent life. They played a part in the youth of the nation. History does not omit them from those days of hope and discovery. They belong to "the great story of men." One of those threads led back to Bedford, Pennsylvania, where Reuben Alexander Riley, father of the poet, was born in the year 1819.

"I know when my father was born, at any rate," once remarked the poet, crowing over the one date in history he could remember.

"When?" he was asked.

"The year Queen Victoria was born."

"And what year was that?"

"I don't know."

Reuben Riley was the fifth in a family of fourteen children. His father, Andrew Riley, and his mother, Margaret (Sleek) Riley, were born and reared in Pennsylvania. "My grandfather Riley," said Reuben,

"was an Irishman and my grandfather Slek, a German. Both grandmothers were English."

In 1825 Andrew Riley moved with his family to western Ohio, and a few years later across the Indiana line to a knoll on Stony Creek, Randolph County, where he built a log cabin near a cluster of giant trees known as the "sugar orchard." On the way from Pennsylvania, a distance of four hundred miles, the family experienced many hardships. The father had sold all his belongings for thirty dollars—except a horse, a "carry-all" and some clothing. He and the older sons walked while the mother drove the wagon and cared for the youngsters. They lived in the open, building camp-fires in the woods at night. Through the foothills of the Alleghanies, their food was chiefly chestnuts and gingerbread. In Ohio they had such luxuries as Indian corn, apples and sweet potatoes.

After reaching the woods of Indiana, so tradition says, "they lived on the fat of the land." There were grains, venison, squirrels and plenty of vegetables. There were wild animals to trap and wild turkeys to shoot; red deer came to Stony Creek daily and black bear were abundant.

Andrew Riley, certainly, had enough and to spare. One season when there was a scarcity of grain, destitute Miami Indians came to him and he loaded their ponies with corn. Another year, a stockman insisted on buying all the corn he had at seventy-five cents a bushel. The offer was refused. "My neighbors need it," said he, "for seed and bread." He sold to them for twenty-five cents a bushel.

Such a man was naturally happy in his declining years, and, above all, at peace with himself and the

world. A few days before he died, he said, "I have never intentionally wronged any man. I have not been vulgar or profane. I have tried to do right. I do not fear to die."

Another line of genealogy led back to Rockingham, North Carolina, where Elizabeth (Marine) Riley, mother of the poet, was born in 1823. She was the tenth in a family of eleven children. Her father, John Marine, and her mother, Fanny (Jones) Marine, were reared in the South. Her family lineage, on the paternal side, could be traced back to the year 1665. Her grandfather Marine was born in Wales, being a descendant of the French Huguenots, "those refugees that brought art and the refinements of civilization wherever they came." His wife was a persecuted Quaker from England. On coming to America they first settled among the Indians in Maryland, but later sought the warmer climate of the Carolinas. In 1825, having lost his little fortune by speculating in weaver-sleighs, John Marine moved with his family to Indiana, crossing the Ohio River at North Bend. Among the incidents of the journey was the halt for a few days on the Ohio, and the joy at finding the new country all agog over the visit of the Great Lafayette. For years the story was a favorite in the Marine family, how the friend of Washington had ascended the river, and after spending a day with Henry Clay under the great trees at Ashland, had come to be the guest of the Queen City, his emotions when he beheld the frontier host on the hills of a city that two score years before was but a cluster of log huts by the river; how the Stars and Stripes rippled from steamboats and buildings, and the applause echoed from both shores while the venerable hero was conveyed across the river

in a barge, how the alleys and commons were blockaded with ox teams and country wagons, how it had rained in torrents for a week, and how the artillery splashed through the muddy streets—a big story it was of patriotism in the backwoods, and the Marines were radiant with it when they reached Indiana.

After a transient residence at New Garden and one or two other points in Wayne County, they settled permanently on the Mississinewa River in Randolph County, where they built a cabin on a high bank at a bend in the river a few miles below Ridgeville. To the south was a white oak grove, a favorite retreat for Elizabeth Marine. "She often went there," said her brother James, "to commune with the big oak." Thus the moral influence of nature began to sink into her soul.

The Marines were flat-boat builders, millers, and verse-makers. About the first thing they did on reaching a new country was to establish a mill site and write a poetic narrative of their wanderings. "John Marine," so said his gifted grandson, "wrote his autobiography in rhyme. He would sit by the fireplace and write heavy turbid poetry on scientific and Biblical subjects. The tendency was to the epic." He laid out the town of Rockingham on the Mississinewa and advertised the lots in rhyme. The town, according to an old record, had so small a growth and so early a death, that settlers of a later period could not find the faintest trace of its location. All that now remains on the site are a few unmarked graves in the far corner of a cow pasture, among them the grave of Elizabeth Marine's mother.

John Marine was not only a boat-builder and rhymer, but a teacher and preacher as well. He preached to

neighbors in his cabin on Sunday. He wrote a book advocating the union of the churches—a suicidal thing to do in his day—which in part is said to have been in rhyme. The manuscript was kept many years in a trunk, but “one winter,” to quote his grandson again, “six mice reduced it to confetti. On the first ballot the jury was divided, but at last the vote was unanimous for destruction.”

As a preacher John Marine had more than a local reputation. He and the poet’s grandmother, Margaret Riley, were leaders in the Methodist camp-meetings of Randolph and Delaware Counties. There were no wandering eyes when they addressed the meetings, particularly when the latter spoke.

“Elizabeth Marine,” said William A. Thornburg, an old resident of Randolph County, “was remarkably pure-minded. I never saw any one so beautiful in a calico dress. She belonged to a large family. They lived in a one-story log house. It had a clay and stick chimney. She went to school, but her chief delight was to play along streams and wander in the green woods. She was always seeing things among the leaves.”

Except that her eyes were blue instead of brown, Longfellow might have chosen Elizabeth Marine for his portrait in “Maidenhood.” Her nature was poetic. One of her girlhood friends remembered her ascending Muncie hill on the Mississinewa to get a view of clearings in the valley, and how happy she was at the sight of the blue smoke curling up from cabins in the morning air. The friend added that “she adored her garden and the cultivation of small fruits. When she stood in the hollyhocks she seemed to be in a trance.” She loved to listen to the sound of woodchoppers, and the

crunch of wagons dragged wearily by oxen along the road. At dusk sweet to her was

“The clinking of bells on the air
Of the cows coming home from the wood.”

The scenery that was uninteresting to Dickens was fair and comely to her. She saw the “orange in the evening sky.” Bright colored birds were “flying flowers.” Peering through the trees she caught the glimpse of Pan although it was not her gift to adorn the scene with the vines of verse as did her illustrious son.

Pomona would have envied this maiden of the Mississinewa her enjoyment of the wild orchards of that period. To listen to “Johnny Appleseed,” the eccentric wanderer who planted them, was one of her happy opportunities. She remembered his telling of his first visit to the Indiana forest, how he had brought a sack of apple seeds on the back of an ox. His narrative pleased her because it was novel. His peculiarities were captivating—like a bird he was, roosting where night overtook him—always wearing ragged clothes—never carrying a gun—never sleeping in a bed—never having any place he called home, yet always happy,

“While he was walking by day or lying at night in the
forest,
Looking up at the trees, and the constellations beyond
them.”

She recalled that he was a Swedenborgian, and how deeply she was impressed with his belief that “growing old in Heaven is growing young.” James Marine, her brother, long afterward said that this was his sister’s vision of Heaven as long as she lived.

Among the influences that came through the mountain passes with the tide of migration, was the breath

of love—love, as the poet has said, fresh with the youth of the world, old and yet ever new, and always beautiful. "We had to reckon with it on all occasions," said a county pioneer; "it swayed young hearts at picnics and camp-meetings as the breeze swayed the green tree-tops." In a settlement on Cabin Creek (to which point the Marines had come after Elizabeth's mother had died and the home had been broken up on the Mississinewa) was a slender young woman twenty years old, lovely as the maiden of Plymouth, and like her, too, in that she was familiar with the hum of the spinning-wheel. Over in the Stony Creek settlement was a young man twenty-four years old. He was lithe, straight and tall, had black eyes, black hair and a radiant face. He was known for his eloquence in debating clubs, had taught school, studied law in a neighboring county-seat, been admitted to the bar, and had had a limited practice in a prairie village in Iowa.

"Now it happens in this country," said Abraham Lincoln, "that, for some reason or other, we meet once every year, somewhere about the Fourth of July. These Fourth of July gatherings, I suppose, have their uses." Indeed, they do, and quite the first of the uses of the Fourth of July gathering in Neeley's Woods, near the village of Windsor, Randolph County, 1843, was that Reuben A. Riley might meet Elizabeth Marine and fall a victim to her beauty. It was a day for family reunions—a barbacue day, the "roast" consisting of several pigs, an ox, and five lambs. Stony Creek laughed through the wood, and there, too, played those other streams, "the life-currents that ebb and flow in human hearts." There was the confusion of wagons, the "herd of country boys," babies tumbling on the ground, and men and maidens making merry.



THE POET'S MOTHER, ABOUT 1860



HIS FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE

The little Dame Trot dwelling of three rooms

As the afternoon wore on, the rounds of pleasure continued, the last year's leaves were swept from a spot in the woods, and, to paraphrase Tennyson,

. "men and maids
 Arranged a country dance, and flew through light
 And shadow, while the twanging violin
 Struck up with *Yankee Doodle*, and lofty *beech*
 Made noise with bees and breeze from end to end."

Here Reuben Riley and Elizabeth Marine met for the first time—and their dancing feet went forward with the rest. "It was love at first sight," said James Marine. "I am an old man now and have seen many days of pleasure, but none like that one in Neeley's Woods. I think I never saw my sister dance so happily."

As usual, Lincoln, the master interpreter of men and events, was right. A young lawyer came to that forest jubilee free as an eagle. He met a young woman he had not seen before, and left the woods that night a captive for life. Truly, "these Fourth of July gatherings have their uses."

Although the crowd assembled at the behest of Liberty, it did not march in procession with banners. A few flags hanging from the trees paid tribute to "the day we celebrate." There were no giant fire crackers, nor Roman candles, no pyrotechnic display except the flames from a log-heap and a few shell-bark hickory fires, which illumined the woods at nightfall. There were no fairy-balloons—but there were fairies, on the authority of James Marine and his friend William Thornburg, who remembered that Elizabeth pointed to them in the flickering shadows above her.

"Love," according to the old saw, "keepeth its captive awake all night." So Reuben Riley, after losing

his heart that July day, had his repose sadly disturbed. There was an Indian pony trail some six miles long between Stony Creek and Cabin Creek, which he traveled frequently by the light of a lantern. Eagerly he

“Followed the pathway that ran through the woods to the house of Priscilla,”

but unlike John Alden he was not led thither by deceptive fancy. He went always on the errand of love. Love “was spinning his life and his fortune” and the life and fortune of a son of song. All thought of returning to the far-away town on the prairies for the practice of law came to an end. His reflections fashioned a home in Indiana. February 20, 1844, he and his sweetheart Elizabeth were married at Unionport on Cabin Creek—and thus the pony path was turned into a bridal path.

For a time previous to her marriage, Elizabeth had lived with her brother at Unionport. “We made them a pretty wedding,” said her sister-in-law. “Her brother Jonathan and Emily Hunt stood up with them. They looked nice. Her wedding dress was a pale pink silk. She wore a long white veil and white kid gloves and shoes. Her infair dress was gray poplin. She looked beautiful in her leghorn bonnet the next day when she rode away on horseback with Reuben through the woods.”

After the honeymoon, which in those days did not include a trip to the Mediterranean, the young husband brought his bride in July, 1844, to live in Greenfield, a village of three hundred inhabitants, on Brandywine Creek, Hancock County, Indiana. It being the usual thing to do then, he moved into a log cabin—

“Upon the main street and the main highway
From East to West—historic in its day—
Known as the National Road.”

Greenfield was fifteen years old. Like the settlements in Randolph County, it was neighbor to the primeval forest. That forest had “multiplicity and richness of tinting,” and there was no “sad poverty of variety in species” among the trees. “The county is heavily timbered,” said an early record, “as largely covered with beech, sugar maple, oak, ash, elm, walnut, buckeye, and hickory as any county in the State.” A report of a Mass Convention refers to settlers “emerging from the beech woods around our peaceful village.” The humorist smiles at the size of that Mass Convention. It was held in a courtroom which was then the upper floor of a log house about twenty feet long.

The population was sparse. There were tangled solitudes in the county that challenged the courage of the bravest immigrant. Roads were few and winding. Settlers consumed days in going to mill, although one is inclined to believe they did other things on the way, for one settler is said to have returned in his ox-cart with “four deer, a half dozen fox and wolf skins, and seven wild turkeys.” Less than two score years before Reuben Riley came to Greenfield, the Delaware Indians were tramping up and down Brandywine, to and from their hunting grounds, then located in the wilderness, now known as Shelby and Bartholomew Counties. So far as the records show there was no poet in the tribe who

“Heard the songs *divine*,
Up and down old Brandywine.”

The young couple promptly took a prominent

place in the life of the community; in its labors and its pleasures. Soon after their coming, the first newspaper was printed, the *Greenfield Reveille*, and the husband announced himself in its business directory as "Attorney at Law, Office at my residence." He was a favorite from the first, and there was a demand for his eloquence on public occasions. He took a lively interest in the national campaign, becoming a champion of

"Polk and Annexation
against
The Bank and High Taxation."

His bride Elizabeth also was a favorite. She was the joy of the neighborhood, and there was a melody in her voice on moonlit evenings that those who heard could not forget. On public occasions she was remembered for "the bloom and grace of womanhood." Old residents recalled how beautiful she looked among friends on the front porch of the old National Hotel. They remembered her charming manners and how lovingly she waved her hand to her husband in a procession that passed by. She contributed verse to the weekly *Reveille* and later to the *Greenfield Spectator* and other county papers, among them *The Family Friend* and the *American Patriot*. What she wrote did not pass muster, but there was a poetic impulse in the heart, none the less. She was a link in the Marine genealogy, and as destiny designed, the last in that succession of verse-makers, who, for a century or more, in their humble way, had foretold the coming of a poet, whose pen would one day transfigure the simple beauty of simple things—and thereby make—

"Rude popular traditions and old tales
Shine as immortal poems."

Once for all it may be said that Greenfield was no mean village. Notwithstanding the neighboring Black Swamp and the marsh lands on Brandywine, it had a charmingly romantic setting. Locust trees and sugar maple saplings stood irregularly along the sidewalks. Beech, ash and walnut, left standing when the ground was cleared, gave variety and shade to backyards and byways. The dwellings were cabins and frame cottages. The business rooms were for the most part one-story buildings, though an occasional two-story one gave promise of more pretentious blocks in days to come.

As Reuben and Elizabeth Riley took their place in the community, so Greenfield took its place in "the great psalm of the republic." It was the gathering place for life currents from southern climes, and from the farmlands and cities of the East. There were students with a record of things done under the elms at Yale, and neighbor to these, now and then, a squire of birth and distinction, who pointed with pride to his huge Carolina wagon and his four-horse team, which he had driven from his plantation on the Great Pedee. This blending of the East and South meant in the next generation "a peculiar people"—a population untrammelled by the artifice of fashion and formality. It meant independence and simplicity of character. An acre of earth near Greenfield dilated with "the grandeur and life of the universe," as did an acre in the vicinity of Boston or Savannah. There was a school of experience, ample opportunity for diversity of endeavor. There were love, courtship and marriage, and devotion to home and country. The region grew robust men, and,

none the less, mothers of large families, whose opinions on men and affairs compared favorably with the judgments of their husbands. There was a native freshness that made even the illiterate interesting. Village statesmen talked profoundly of their country's possibilities and perils, and hunters and woodmen were not strangers to books or the calls of culture.

"We had our dreary days," remarked an early settler, "but were not cast down. We were up with the lark and down with rheumatism but seldom beyond the reach of the lark's song." Nature nourished the poetic impulse, whatever the station in life, state of health, or degree of intelligence.

A peaceful village surrounded by beech woods with a little "willow brook of rhymes" flowing through it, the beech woods a part of a primeval forest diversified with neighborhoods of men, women and children—all in all, as happy a land and time for the birth of a poet as "ever there was under the sun."

CHAPTER II

THE RHYME OF CHILDHOOD

I HAVE no doubt that somewhere in the wilds of this western land the wind, whispering through the chinks of some log cabin, is ruffling the curls upon the brow of a future son of fame."

Such were the words of an Indiana orator in a speech delivered in the forties of the last century. The prophecy was not made in vain. Several sons of fame were born in that decade, but the birth of one particularly concerns these pages. One day in October, 1849, a fortnight after that birth, Fortune singled out a runaway boy to find the cradle of future greatness. Hurrying away from discontentment at his home in Indianapolis, the boy ran eastward along the old Plank Road. It was Sunday morning. The woods were yellowing and orchard boughs were bending with ripened fruit. When he grew hungry he filled his linen coat pockets with apples. Occasionally a farm wagon going to or from church gave him a lift and for a time he was accompanied by a stranger who listened suspiciously to the tale of his woes.

The forenoon was long, the afternoon longer, but just as the sun was sinking behind the notorious Black Swamp the toll-gate burst upon the runaway's tired vision, and a few moments later he saw in the deepening twilight the village of Greenfield, the end of his day's flight. At the edge of town he fell in with a boy who had been driving cows to pasture. The

lad directed him to the home of one Reuben A. Riley—a young lawyer, thirty years of age, and a leading citizen of the little county-seat.

“There the lawyer lives,” said the boy as they entered Main Street, pointing to a little, unpainted, half-frame, half-log house in the southeast corner of its lot. At the gate the boys parted and soon a timid knock brought the lawyer to the door—and the runaway stood speechless in the presence of his brother. Not meeting in the stern dark eye of the lawyer the welcome he hoped for, the young brother covered his face with his hands and sat down on the door-step. At the same moment he heard the rustle of a dress and the voice of a gentle wife and mother. She stood for an instant, “saintly and sad as the twilight,” and then led the boy through the front room to the kitchen—the frame structure at the rear of the cabin.

Now that the runaway is in the arms of the mother, it is good to listen to his story in his own words—as it was told half a century later. “Within her arms,” said he, “I had the feeling of utter security. She combed my hair and seated me on her knee. As the story of my running away proceeded, I looked up and there inside the kitchen door stood the swarthy form of the lawyer, his arms folded and his eyes bent severely upon us. Lifting her soft blue-gray eyes to his, with tears shining on their fringes like dew on the grass, she pled my cause. ‘Let him stay and be a companion to our children,’ said she. At this, the black eyes softened. Laying his hand on my head and looking longingly into her face, he said, ‘There, Lizzie, it is settled; he can stay; I will inform the folks to-morrow.’

“Then came supper—and such a supper the Prodigal Son never feasted upon. Everything—pie, cake, pre-

serves, milk and bread white as snow—and all the time the mother standing behind my chair, filling my plate as often as I could clear it. After supper we went to the front room. ‘I have something pretty to show you,’ she said; ‘something you have never seen.’ Leading me to an old-fashioned box cradle, near the window where the ‘Queen of the Prairie’ shed its fragrance on the night breeze, she gently lifted a snowy little cover and showed me the sleeping face of a babe. I stooped and kissed its dainty lips—and thus I entered a Child-World.”

The baby had been born Sunday morning, October 7, 1849, and a week later christened James Whitcomb Riley in response to the father’s admiration for Governor James Whitcomb of Indiana. “At no period in the history of the State,” said the Governor, in his Thanksgiving message, “has the bounty of God in the control of the seasons been so signally manifested towards us as during the year now drawing to a close.” He was thinking of material blessings, but Heaven was not unmindful of the new birth of poesy in the box cradle at Greenfield.

True to the instincts of child-nature, the boy started from his cradle on a voyage of discovery. “The first thing I remember,” said Riley, “was my father’s riding up to the woodhouse door with a deer hanging from the pommel of his saddle; and about the second thing I remember was the bugler who galloped west on the National Road with news of the death of President Taylor.” Before he could walk the Riley child learned that his by-name was “Bud,” and that he had been thus lovingly distinguished by his Uncle Mart, Martin Whitten Riley, the runaway who had discovered him in the box cradle. The uncle, a few years “Bud’s” senior, was

himself a youth of "poetic symptoms," and, next to the mother, had the greatest influence on her boy in that morning of childish glee. He could invent stories for boys almost as interesting as those he remembered from books. He built a playhouse for the children in the apple trees, and sometimes when summer days were hot and long he climbed to it himself "to moon over a novel" or to ease his heart of "hopeless verse." In springtime, when the hired hand went to the country to plant and plow corn, he took his place in the yard and garden. He pruned the apple trees, and it was often his fortune to sniff "alluring whiffs of the dear old-fashioned dinners the children loved." He was also the hired girl when the mother had more than she could do, as was often the case. At meal-time he seated

"The garland of glad faces round the board—
Each member of the family restored
To his or her place, with an extra chair"

for the farmer the father brought in from the street, or a state politician who came from afar on the long highway for a conference with the lawyer at the noon hour.

Uncle Mart inspired the little "Bud" with his first ambition, the desire to be a baker, and at divers times took the place of the mother or the hired girl when they were too busy to give lessons in cooking. "Bud" spent much of the time in the kitchen, rolling dough and making pies, which at first were little more than fragments. After a while he improved so that he "could build pies of legitimate size. My joy" (to quote from his own memory of them) "was complete when I could fashion a custard pie—and then came the feat, worthy of a slight-of-hand performer, of getting it

into the oven without spilling." His ambition was not a childish whim. For several years he felt a twinge of disappointment that he had not realized it. He *really* thought he would make a success as a baker.

The kitchen being a world far too small for a boy of "Bud's" possibilities, the circle of his discoveries soon extended to the garden and stable lot; in short, he began to distinguish himself by an eminent degree of curiosity. "Then," as he observed when older, "was the flood-tide of interrogation points. I could ask more questions than grandfather in Paradise could answer in a year"—why bears steal pigs from the pen—why they carry bee gums on their arms—where go the wagons on the Plank Road—what the leaves say when they whisper—why the grass is green—why the rain drools down the window-pane—why the moon is low and the stars are high—never an end of questions—and never an end of questing. One day the mother discovered that "Bud" was a poet, when he came running from the yard, all in a flutter, with a story of an apple shower. "Uncle held the basket," he prattled,

"Old Aunt Fanny wuz shaking 'em down,
And Johnny and Jimmy wuz picking 'em up."

The lines lacked the touch of the trained lyrist, but as Uncle Mart said, "they tinkled." The hint of a tune-future may be taken for what it is worth, but there is testimony to the effect that the poetic impulse dawned in the Riley heart very early. He did not, like Bryant, "contribute verse to the county paper before he was ten years old," but he was a poet in feeling before that date. One spring morning Uncle Mart led him away for a whole-day ramble up a stream that rose in the hills and came prattling through the village—"the

little willowy Branch of rhymes," it was, "that split the town" and mingled its current

"With the limpid, laughing waters
Of the Classic Brandywine."

As Riley remembered, he was about six or seven years old. For him it was a day of blooming cheeks and open brow—a day of discovery. He recalled that Uncle Mart talked of the stream and the thick woods as a stage. He and "Bud" were stage-hands lifting curtains for views of scenery. "And not a great while after," said Riley, recalling the enchantment of that childish hour, "I learned that the world is a stage and that Fortune is the stage-hand that lifts the curtain." Back of Uncle Mart and "Bud" was a fairy impulse from the mother. The uncle credits her with "building and formulating the happiest programs that were ever placed upon the boards of her home stage." The ramble along the Branch was the beginning of a period that sparkled with joy akin to that of the dancing stream. Often "Bud" was drawn to its banks to listen to its limpid waters. Its pebbles, glittering in the ripples, looked up to him "like the eyes of love." They did not kindle the poetic impulse in him as it was kindled a few years later by Tharpe's Pond, a "little mirror of the sky" in the woods, but there were "poetic symptoms" unmistakably. While he sought the play-place of his childhood, Nature planted in his heart the germs of "The Brook-Song," a lilting melody that rivals the music of the stream that inspired it. It was no fleeting influence that sparkled in his vision

"Till the gurgle and refrain
Of its music in his brain
Wrought a happiness as keen to him as pain."

A playmate of his age (now Mrs. Rose Mitchell Gregg) gives a village portrait of the Riley boy, such a picture as a friend once gave of Tennyson paddling in the sandy shallows of *his* boyhood stream. "I saw Riley once," she writes, "when he was about eight years old, down in our neighborhood wading in the Branch with his trousers rolled up above his knees. Holding them high as he could with his hands, he was kicking the water and looking for the deep places. He wore a little blue roundabout and a soft, white felt hat without band or lining. His hair was very light and cut short, his eyes big and blue and his face freckled. He was a slight little fellow, but keen and alert. I wondered why he had wandered so far from home. Wading in the Branch was a joyous pastime for Greenfield children." Smiling back on the incident Riley gave it the flavor of a rhyme—

"My hair was just white as a dandelion ball,
My face freckled worse than an old kitchen wall."

His love of the brook reveals at that very early date what became for him a primary motive of life: passion for the beautiful—that *something* that sends children to the fields for flowers, the sense that delights in singing birds, the colors of sunset, and the rustle of leaves in October woods. "I remember," said Riley, "when that passion became a controlling influence, how it incited me to an act that does not now flame with the color it had then. I wanted a pair of boots with red tops. I slipped away from home to a shoe store where my father bought on credit. After looking in vain for them I selected a pair with *green* tops and told the clerk to charge them. At home I stole upstairs to my bedroom and there wore them all alone with great joy.

I strode around the room proud as a knight with a spur on his heel. When any one came up the stairway I quickly pulled them off and hid them under the feather bed. Thus I enjoyed them for two weeks before my purchase was discovered. My father insisted on returning them, but my mother's love prevailed, and after that I was permitted to wear them in public."

A similar instance was Riley's purchase of a cake of toilet soap with pennies he had saved for the purpose. "I was probably eight years old," said he. "I wanted to pace back and forth in front of the show case—just look at it for a while before I bought. When a clerk came toward me I looked at something else till he gave attention to another customer. For weeks after I bought it I kept the cake in my pocket—just pleased to my finger-tips with its transparent beauty. I shall not grow old so long as I enjoy a show case of toilet soap."

As runs the proverb, God oft hath a large share in a little house. In the present history, His share is in the log cabin that stood at the side of the old National Road in Greenfield. In the human as well as the divine order of things, the day arrived for it to be torn down—the family having moved to a new homestead—and Uncle Mart and the children came with the hired man to that end. Having lived in it for a decade, the mother was pensive, but the children were altogether happy.

In that cabin home originated an influence that was as far-reaching as it was beautiful—the faith in fairies. Night after night Uncle Mart had tucked little "Bud" in his trundle bed and lulled him to sleep with fairy tales. That was the *beginning*. The faith in fairies never died. When "Bud" became a man, it was modified, but never forsaken. "Earth out-

grows the mystic fancies," sang Mrs. Browning. As Riley saw it, the outgrowth was a fatal day for the earth. He held with Schiller and Wordsworth that in the overthrow of mythology the world had lost more than it had gained. As the image-making power in the mind of the race was busy with the marvelous things of old, so should it be busy with the marvelous things of now. Hence the *Arabian Nights* remained his favorite book. To the last, he held unalterably to the sentiment of the "Natural Educationists," that there are fairies in the hearts of all good and great people—"that fairies whisper to us to do good deeds—that fairies are the creative power which has caused the building of great structures, the painting of great pictures, the composition of great music, and the production of great poems." His lead pencil, a candlestick, wicker baskets and other objects about the room were fairies in disguise. Every thought that kindled his heart into rapture came to him on fairy wings from the shores of mystery, and whenever anything he did fell below the plane of fairy endeavor, "was reduced," as he said, "by the tyranny of conditions to the level of a humdrum existence," he was unhappy. The fairies were absent. The fire in his heart was low. Like Lowell, he mourned the loss of Aladdin's lamp and the beautiful castles in Spain. But this was never so when he could maintain a *fairy interest* in his work. Whenever his faculties were quickened to the fervor he experienced in childhood, when visions of pure joy ravished his heart, his fevered sight was cooled. Then all was love—

"The chords of life in utmost tension
With the fervor of invention."

The Marines traced a line of genealogy back to descendants of the Celts in Wales, the people, said by some authorities, to have had the most poetic childhood of all the races. Who knows? Perhaps Riley's adorable faith in fairies, and his mother's before him, were after all the faith of the little people that once lived in the obscure islands and peninsulas of western Europe. Who knows? His charming simplicity, his delicacy of feeling, and his desire to penetrate the unknown may have had a Celtic origin, may have been traceable to "the race that above all others was fitted for family life and fireside joys." It is certainly a Celtic picture we have of Riley as a child in the log cottage. In the cabin, after twilight, while the apples sputtered on the hearth and the light from the fireplace flickered on the walls, stories reeled from Uncle Mart's fancy as brightly as the flames laughed up the chimney; and best of all, the mother approved the harmless fictions and laughed heartily with the flames and the children. "Bud" once noted the absence of katydids and crickets—could not understand it. They were the fairies of summer-time, the mother had explained—

"Only in the *winter-time*
Did *they* ever stop,
In the chip-and-splinter-time
When the backlogs pop."

As the cabin walls were lowered, other incidents were recalled. The children remembered the jolly winters, and particularly the coldest night of the year when the mother held the lamp and little "Bud" a candle, while they chinked the cracks where the wind blew through the floor. And just outside the front door, like a sentinel, the old Snow-Man had stood for weeks in "lordly

grandeur,"—the masterpiece that had surpassed the art of classic Greece. Uncle Mart was reminded of shelter from the rain. He distinctly remembered the "reverential shade" on the mother's face when listening to distant thunder, and her smile of gratitude when she heard the refrain of the rain on the roof. The mother recalled a rainy day when the father was away and the other children had gone a-visiting, how little "Bud" in a state of breathless anticipation, stood by the window, marking the teams as they approached and vanished on the National Road:

"And there was the cabin window—
Tinkle, and drip, and drip!
The rain above, and a mother's love,
And God's companionship!"

All in all, winter and summer, the log cottage was a thing of blessed memory. The poet was born there who, when grown, was to save from the ruins a picture of its simplicity and beauty—the young mother throned in her rocking-chair with a work-basket on the floor, the laughter and call of the children across the way, the summer wind luring the fragrance of roses from her window, the while her *dreamy boy*, lying near her, face downward, was bending

"above a book
Of pictures, with a rapt ecstatic look—
Even as the mother's, by the self-same spell,
Was lifted with a light ineffable—
As though her senses caught no *mortal cry*,
But heard, instead, some *poem* going by."

One autumn the log cabin had received a coat of weather-boarding, but the exact year is indefinite, some claiming it was the year the poet was born, others the year following. Even the poet's father, who drew a

sketch of the cottage in his old age, was not sufficiently definite on the point to be historic. But all agree that the young married couple, on coming from the Randolph County woods, to live in Greenfield, occupied the cabin. All agree that the poet was born there, and that it stood snugly at the corner of the lot in the shade of trees that grew on the edge of the street.

Prior to the birth of his famous son, Reuben A. Riley had served one term in the state legislature with credit to himself and his constituency. There he had met Governor James Whitcomb, whom to meet was to honor and love. A few years later he zealously discharged the duties of county prosecuting attorney. He took great interest in politics, and on several occasions distinguished himself for his eloquent defense of freedom. He was a leader in the Democratic party of Indiana and so remained till the Fremont campaign when he with Oliver P. Morton and others espoused the cause of the Republican party. In those stormy years he was in the full strength of his young manhood. Republican leaders, Morton among them, placed a high estimate on his services "in moulding the sentiments of the young men of the State," who later responded to the call of President Lincoln. "In the political campaigns from 1852 to 1860," to quote from a political opponent, "there was no orator more in demand than Reuben A. Riley, or one who more uniformly satisfied the demand. He expounded the principles of the new party as did no other orator in Indiana. His joint debates were the talk of campaigns. Men referred to his speeches as finished orations."

All the while he was succeeding in the practice of the law. His public services brought him clients, brought him financial success. Prosperity came down

the National Road and tipped the horn of plenty at his door, and that meant the means for a larger Riley homestead,

“The simple, new frame house—eight rooms in all—
Set just one side the center of the small
But very hopeful Indiana town.”

While the father was absent campaigning, the mother and children at home worked with Mother Nature. They had a grape-arbor built like a covered bridge over the pathway to the garden. A row of currant bushes grew near. Bees murmured in hives at the side of the lot. Lilacs and flowering vines grew lavishly in the front yard. Apple trees stood here and there between the street and the garden, and

“Under the spacious shade of these, the eyes
Of swinging children saw the soft-changing skies.”

In that family of the Long Ago, were two brothers and two sisters—each, in the gracious afterwhiles, happily recalled by the gifted brother in the *Child-World*. A third sister, Martha Celestia Riley, born February 21, 1847, died in childhood. Oldest of the brothers was John Andrew Riley, born December 11, 1844. He was the grave leader among them. He had a quick observant eye and a keen retentive memory. Although inclined to serious duties, he nevertheless could forget the gravity of life and kindle fires of delight. For a season he would make tame incidents sparkle with lively mirth, and then (the children could never just quite tell why) there almost invariably followed an interval of seeming remorse that made him undesirable company. Nevertheless he was loved for his love of others:

"So do I think of you alway,
Brother of mine, as the tree,—
Giving the ripest wealth of your love
To the world as well as me."

The youngest brother, Humboldt Alexander Riley, was born October 15, 1858. He was specially remembered for his insistence on truth in his elders. They recalled his peach-bloom complexion and particularly his love of father and mother. Freaks of temper were yoked in him to uncommon aspirations and affections. He was the lorn child,

"Whose yearnings, aches and stings
Over poor little things"

were as poignant and pitiful as the sorrow of the family over his death in early manhood.

The second daughter, Elva May Riley, born January 14, 1856, was the "little lady" with golden curls. She had the blue of the skies in her eyes. She never romped up and down stairs. She was

"thoughtful every way
Of others first—The kind of a child at play
That 'gave up,' for the rest, the ripest pear
Or peach or apple in the garden there."

The third and youngest daughter, Mary Elizabeth Riley, the only member of the family living at the time these words are written, was born October 27, 1864. With a touch of fancy (in the child book) her eminent brother recalled a little girl with a "velvet lisp on elfin lips"—

"Though what her lips missed, her dark eyes could say
With looks that made her meaning clear as day."

As she grew to womanhood, she manifested many of

his characteristics, his subtle recognition of and affection for the fairy wonderland of days gone by, love of nature, and the harmless eccentricities of human kind.

It may seem to some that the Riley lad neglected the schoolroom, and in one sense he did. "Omit the schoolroom from my history entirely," he once said, "and the record of my career would not be seriously affected." The remark was not made in criticism of the public school, but rather to show that he had not been educated in the conventional manner. In ways innumerable, before he entered the schoolhouse, he was getting an education. He was taught to read at home. From the very first he seems to have practised "the art of thinking, the art of using his mind." His little system of opinions was not faultless, but he dared to uphold it. He strove for the useful side of things and was just as vigorous in contending against what he thought was useless. He compassed the *First Reader* while other children struggled with its opening pages. In a few days he had reached the end of the book—the lesson in which Willy, Katy, Carry and their mother go to the seaside. The children were digging in the sand with wooden spades, when they threw them down to look at a ship sailing by. Soon the ship will be out of sight, according to the lesson, and the children will go home. "They will do nothing of the sort," said Riley, recalling his youthful dream; "they will sail with the ship to foreign lands for tea, sugar, pineapples and cocoanuts. The wind will transport them to far-away gardens of happiness, at least it did me, and I believe all children will be so transported if parents would begin aright to develop in them the imaginative faculty. Of course children do not have the poetic vision Long-

fellow had when he lay down and listened to the sound of the waves, but they do have in their little hearts a picture of

‘Spanish sailors with bearded lips
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,
And the magic of the sea.’”

The reason for “Bud’s” special interest in the sea-side was this. He had been taught his letters and *Primer* by his mother and Uncle Mart, but the art of comprehending what he read was chiefly taught him by a *careless-haired* boy, Almon Keefer, whose “interesting and original ways with children,” said Riley, “fairly ignite the eye of memory with rapture.” Almon had an open, honest countenance and a joyous interest in nature but his chief merit, as far as the Riley nursery was concerned, was his interest in books, and his skill in reading aloud to children. One of the books he read was *Tales of the Ocean*, an old book of stories, in character much like *Tales of the Wayside Inn*. Of the early books it was quite near if not the first of the list.

“Its back was gone,
But its vitality went bravely on
With its delicious tales of land and sea.”

When therefore “Bud” was sent to school, it was natural that he should protest against the foolish repetitions in the *First Reader* and hurry on through it to kernels of interest. He was a little rebel at the end of the second lesson:

“Is it an ax?
It is an ax.
It is my ax.
Is it by me?
My ax is by me.
So it is.”



LOG CABIN ON THE NATIONAL ROAD WHERE THE POET WAS BORN



RILEY HOMESTEAD IN GREENFIELD, 1856

"How criminal," said Riley, commenting on the schoolboy experience, "to cramp the imagination of a child in a barren back-lot like that when a world of ships and singing birds and meadow fields may be had for the asking. The secret of the whole matter is this, whether it be the *lesson* for the child or the *book* for the man—it *must be interesting*." A vital opinion, paralleled by the observation of Herbert Spencer, that too often our system of education *drags the child away from the facts in which it is interested*. "Bud" Riley was Spencer's self-taught London gamin gathering out-of-school wisdom for himself.

When Riley became associate editor of a county paper, he reiterated his protest in a half-column, "To Parents and Preceptors":

"We will shortly issue," he wrote in humorous vein in the first paragraph, "a little educational work, which we design shall take the place of McGuffey's *First Reader*. We have nothing against McGuffey, but we love the institutions of our country, moral and educational, and by the publication of the little volume we are at present compiling, we confidently expect to meet a long-felt want of our public schools, and by its presentation to our bright-eyed little friend, 'the school-boy, with shining morning face, creeping like a snail, unwillingly to school,' we expect to take the initial step toward a general revolution of the educational system as it stands to-day."

Save for his first school Riley seldom recalled his school-days pleasantly. "My first teacher," said he, "Mrs. Frances Neill, was a little, old, rosy, roly-poly woman—looking as though she might have just come rolling out of a fairy story, so lovable she was and so jolly and so amiable. Her school was kept in a little old

one-story dwelling of three rooms, and—like a bracket on the wall—a little porch in the rear, which was part of the playground of her ‘scholars,’—for in those days pupils were very affectionately called ‘scholars.’ Her very youthful school was composed of possibly twelve or fifteen boys and girls. I remember particularly the lame boy, who always had the first ride in the swing in the locust tree at ‘recess.’

“This first teacher was a mother, too, to all her ‘scholars.’ When drowsy they were often carried to an inner room—a sitting-room—where many times I was taken with a pair of little chaps and laid to slumber on a little made-down pallet on the floor. She would oftentimes take three or four of us together; and I can recall how my playmate and I, having been admonished into silence, grew deeply interested in looking at her husband, a spare old blind man sitting always by the window, which had its shade drawn down. After a while we became accustomed to the idea, and when our awe had subsided we used to sit in a little sewing chair and laugh and talk in whispers and give imitations of the little old man at the window.”

Riley recalled that Mrs. Neill wore a white cap with ribbands—and that she also wore a mole on her face “right where Abraham Lincoln wore his, and that it had eye-winkers in it, for when she kissed him they tickled his nose.” Occasionally a large boy came up from town and during recess beat a tenor drum to drive the mice away, but the “scholars” never saw any mice. When a boy was guilty of swearing Mrs. Neill wrapped a rag round a pen holder, dipped it in ashes and cleansed his mouth. If he had kicked another boy she whipped him on the foot. Her whippings were so softly administered that the

"scholars" rather enjoyed them, particularly the sequel, when she led the penitent to a little Dame Trot kitchen and gave him a piece of fried chicken, or a big slice of white bread buttered with jam or jelly. When the time came to call the children to their books, she tied a yellow bandana to a switch and cheerily waved it at the door. Occasionally one "scholar" (the reader infers his name) came tardily from the yard wearily repeating, "By Double, it's Books! By Double, it's Books!" The *outside* of the schoolhouse was his favorite side; he preferred to climb the apple trees in the schoolhouse lot. There was a Harvest tree at home, a few doors away, on which the apples "fairly *hurried* ripe for him." As he happily said, "they dropped to meet me half-way up the tree." The school yard was the place for happiness:

"Best, I guess,
Was the old 'Recess'—

No tedious lesson nor irksome rule—
When the whole round World was as sweet to me
As the big ripe apple I brought to School."

The little school world was not unlike other worlds of its kind except, perhaps, that it had a larger measure of freedom. As to signs in it of future greatness, there was none. "The Big Tree sprout," a wit latterly observed, "was not bigger than any other sprouts. It was the ordinary thing; it made no show; it did not suggest a future son of fame." Though small, the world was nevertheless big enough to grow a large tree of gratitude. Like the log cabin in which the Riley child was born, the little schoolroom was a thing of blessed memory. The "scholar" always remembered his first teacher as "a very dear old woman, so old she was," he said, "that she died one afternoon—just

like falling asleep. She was so tired, so worn and old. Who knows?" he asked, when age approached his own footsteps. "She may be rested now. Somewhere she may be waiting for all the little boys and girls she loved to come romping in again."

Usually, when prompted to write, Riley looked backward for material. The pioneer past was a rich landscape for him. It was beautifully blended with the hope of the future. The Long Ago was one with the golden meadow of the Great To Be. He would find a rustic frame on the walls of memory and make a picture for it that sometimes surpassed the art of the painter. Such a picture is the popular poem, "Out to Old Aunt Mary's." Fortune made the frame for it one summer in his childhood days. On condition that they were good school children, the mother had promised "Bud" and his elder brother, John, a holiday with relatives a few miles away on Sugar Creek, and then a week's visit with uncles and aunts some fifty miles distant in Morgan County. Passing the toll-gate with its well-sweep pole, the boys began to realize their dream in the sunshine of the old National Road, the long highway that was lost somewhere in the wilderness of the West. Near Sugar Creek they left the highway for a winding road past fields and clearings in the backwoods. The elder brother often recalled the welcome they received from a family of children who came romping through the barn lot to the end of the long lane, up which he and "Bud" hurried on the wings of joy. As the poetic brother remembered it,

"They pattered along in the dust of the lane,
As light as the tips of the drops of the rain."

Riley gives briefly his own account of the visit to

Morgan County. "In a vague way," said he, seeking a tangible basis for the poem, "I had in mind a visit to Mooresville and Martinsville, when Cousin Rufus (Judge William R. Hough of Greenfield) and my mother drove there with my brother and me and my sister Elva, then a child in her mother's arms. My brother and I sat on a seat that unfolded from the dashboard in the manner of old-fashioned vehicles of the time. It was a joyous journey, for Cousin Rufus was the jolliest, cheeriest young man that ever lived and there was always a song on his lips. We drove from Greenfield to Indianapolis, where we stopped for a midday meal. At Mooresville we visited Uncle James and Aunt Ann Marine, and at Martinsville, Uncle Charles and Aunt Hester Marine." At both places, "Bud's" keen appetite was satisfied with bountiful old-fashioned dinners—coffee so hot it spangled his eyes with tears, honey in the comb, quince "preserves," juicy pies, and jelly and jam and marmalade.

There were several other visits, so that the poem is truly a composite one. There was no particular Aunt Mary, but the little journey to Sugar Creek and the longer one to Morgan County formed the rustic frame for the picture. "The simple, child-felt joy of those visits," to quote Riley's words, "was as warm in my memory when I wrote the poem as when a boy I jogged back on the dusty road to Greenfield."

Citizens of Greenfield maintained what was commonly termed a Select School supported by subscription, a spring and summer term of twelve weeks, "chiefly," said an old resident, "for the purpose of keeping idle children off the streets." "It is desirable," said the school notice, "that all scholars commence with the school, as it will be to their material

advantage, as well as an accommodation to the teacher." "Bud" Riley saw in it no "material advantage." He was not disposed to "accommodate the teacher" in that way. School in June and July was a violation of natural laws. Holidays, alas, were rare, with intolerable periods between: "Fourth of July—Circus Day—and Decoration Day—but give *him Saturday*, when he could play and play and play." As might be expected, the humdrum of the school made a runaway out of him. "I made a break," said he, "for the open world." One day he hurried away in his bare feet down a dusty lane to a cornfield; another day across an orchard to Brandywine to listen to the splashing of the swimmers. Another day he waded through the tall grass to an old graveyard. Every boy knew of such a spot in the early days. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn ran to one a mile or two from the village, an old-fashioned western kind, "with a crazy board fence around it." Such a cluster of pioneer graves the Riley lad and his shabby companions found in their rambles, "save," said Riley, "that it was enclosed with a zigzag rail fence which the cows pushed down for grazing purposes." Be it known, since the lads played Robin Hood among the broken headstones and in the "Sherwood Forest" near, that their little souls were not steeped in melancholy. Hard by stood the wide-spreading beech with its lower boughs touching the earth, the great *baobab* tree of Riley's childhood. How alluring it was. Made magical by the soft summer atmosphere and the enchanting vista of open fields, to a boy it seemed in the distance a gigantic mound of verdure, over which he might roll and tumble as he would roll in beds of blue-grass on the hillside.

Another day, smiling and laughing with his little

friends, he ran away from school to the mulberry tree. Was there ever anything more pathetic to a child than that boy sitting at his desk in hot weather, waiting for a holiday to come? And anything more poetic than his anticipation of that tree? The thought of it as he ran onward with the boys down the long highway was as balmy as the breeze that powdered his path with the blossoms from the locust trees. "The dust in the road," said Riley, "was like velvet. The odor from ragweed and fennel was sweet as the scent of lilies in the Garden of Eden."

Several mulberry trees stood in fields round Greenfield, a venerable one in the edge of a meadow, east of the Old Fair Ground, near Little Brandywine. "I vividly recall," said Riley, "how we used to scramble across the meadow to that tree. Not until we were directly beneath it did the birds, voraciously feeding on the berries, see us, and then they flew away in a whirl of confusion. And the *fruit* of that tree! It had a strange deliciousness. Simply—it was to all other fruits as maple syrup is to all other syrups."

A rail was placed in the fork of the tree for boys to climb. That rail led to Fame for one of them—but how blissfully ignorant they were of all her trumpets and temples;

"What were all the green laurels of Fame unto me,
With my brows in the boughs of the mulberry tree?"

Some forty years after the poet's boyhood, Judge David S. Gooding found a truant youth stealing down the back ways of Greenfield, who tried to excuse his truancy to the Judge on the ground that James Whitcomb Riley ran away from school to a mulberry tree. "Yes, sir," returned the Judge, with his usual Doctor

Johnson air, "yes, sir—and when you, my lad, promise to write as fine a poem as 'The Mulberry Tree,' *you* may run away from school. The Riley boy was wide-awake; he played Robin Hood; he saw the leafy shade; he heard the flutter of birds; you play nothing, you see nothing, hear nothing; you are skulking, hiding along the creek here like a burglar. Go back to school!—read your books!"

Whatever may be said in behalf of modern school-days with all their conveniences and improvements, one fact is not disputed by those who recall the golden glory of days gone by: that the children of the present do not find the paradise in their surroundings that many children of the pioneer day found in theirs. Boys and girls had their sorrows then, it is true, but they also had something the modern child too often does not have—a Child-heart nourished with heaven-born visions and realizations of joy and beauty. Too often the modern Child-heart is dwarfed and smothered by the glitter of deception, show and sham. "The Child-heart," the poet often said, and the older he grew the more fervidly he said it:

"The Child-heart is so strange a little thing—
So mild—so timorously shy and small—
When *grown-up* hearts throb, it goes scampering
Behind the wall, nor dares peer out at all—

but *could* it peer out, could it come to us from the darkness, could it light up this dull thing we call maturity, could we become children in trust, in truth, in love, then civilization would enter the kingdom of Heaven as Jesus said—and that kingdom would be *here* and *now*. I know," the poet continued, "the Bible says to put away childish things, but we are not to put away the Child-heart, the soul-reposing belief in things, the pure,

heavenly absence of all pretension—we are not to put that away. Why is it I can not read mythology to-day? Because I have lost faith in it. Why, when I read *Pilgrim's Progress*, I could see the whiskers on Giant Despair as plain as day. But I could not have read it had I known it was an allegory. All of these fancies of my childhood have made it possible for me to understand children now-a-days, and to portray them more perfectly. When I come across a fanciful child, just about as superstitious as I was, I know how to talk to it and better how to write about the things it loves.”

It was Riley's boyhood fortune to vibrate between town and country. “I was not quite a country boy,” said he; “I lived in a little village, just across the alley from the country. I associated with country boys and girls. I was always on hand at the country gatherings. When I went to see my little friends in the country I stayed all night. I have slept four-in-a-bed after a boisterous hunt with the boys for watermelons in the cornfields. In all my associations with country people there was always enough distinction for me to see the better side of them as a visitor.”

It is literally true that the poet in the morning-tide of life realized the happiness of childhood he so lovingly describes in his poems. In the vicinity of Greenfield, that village of three or four hundred inhabitants, he found a wondrous world. He had his little share of disappointments, of course, but they did not fill his childish cup with bitterness. Within wandering distance of the town he found the Paradise of Childhood. There in season, the songs of orchard-birds dripped daily from whispering trees. There was the green earth and the infinite heavens above it he called the Child-World.

"The blossom-time of existence," he wrote, recalling his boyhood excursions;

"How always fair it was and fresh and new—
How every affluent hour heaped heart and eyes
With treasures of surprise."

Rapture infinite, mysteries unriddled but retaining their primitive enchantment still—such the Riley lad found in and around Greenfield.

After the poet had passed his fiftieth mile-stone he frequently speculated on what Heaven would be like, and the sort of life one would live there. "We dream of Heaven," said he; "we were in Heaven when we were children and did not know it. The field is not limited," he went on; "you can imagine that anything can take place in Heaven; anything, anything. For instance, you might imagine that things would go on there as in frontier times they did here on earth. Restore the rapture and rhythm of my childhood days and I can not think of many improvements. In Heaven each one of us might be assigned certain things to do, certain daily tasks; and betimes we might ourselves choose to do the thing we desire to do most of all. Think of it! Suppose I was permitted to drop on my knees again and inhale the fragrance of crushed penny-royal—permitted to go back to a day in my childhood, the day I first wandered away with my little friends to the mulberry tree—permitted to have the whole, long joyous day before me again: be happy, ragged, barefooted, with everything back as it used to be—even to the stone-bruise on my heel. To have over again one of those dewy mornings of fifty years ago!"

The gracious smile of those days of old! To Riley it was the glitter of the sun in tropic lands.

Joyous winds winnowed cares from life as chaff from the wheat. His blood was warm as wine. All things throbbed with the pulse of spring.

In those days of obscure beginnings the recluse who had lived in the cabin by Walden Pond published his *Story of Life in the Woods*. "The finest qualities of our nature," he wrote, "like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly. We have no time to be anything but machines. We lay up treasures where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. Wasting our substance in blind obedience to blundering oracles, we contract ourselves in a nutshell of frivolous employment and creep down the road of life."

Thus the recluse made his protest against the vanities of civilized life. Soon after he made it, there slipped away to the woods near Greenfield a lad ten or twelve years of age, who was destined to make a similar protest—not as a recluse, not harshly, but gently, so deftly indeed that the people began to nourish the finer qualities of their nature without marking the precise moment when the sunlight came to warm them into being. Alone in the solitude, the lad stood on the shore of a little "lake of light," whose wine-colored waters were as transparent as the inland sea in Walden Woods, although its homely name, Tharpe's Pond, lacked the euphony of the classic New England name. It was a balmy summer day. Wading into the warm, "winey waters" up to his waist, he gazed through a sky-window in the roof of the woods. What were his thoughts?

“Did he sleep? Did he dream?
Did he wonder and doubt?
Were things what they seem?
Or were visions about?”

Forward from that day, he was never wholly alone in the world—never just James Whitcomb Riley. There was always beside him the lad of Used-To-Be, what he called “the quivering, palpitating spirit of youth.” Sometimes the spirit was a vague, sometimes a vivid presence. Whenever it was *vivid*, whenever he stood before an unexplored world with the rapture of the lad who stood before the deep, pathless forest, then he could think the thoughts, live the hopes, and suffer the tragedies of little folks. He could write verse for children. “Often,” said Riley, recalling his lost youth, “I stood on the shore of the pond and gazed into the interminable mystery of the woods. Every tree was a fabulous consideration. Deer came with their antlers up to question the approach of civilization. There was a pigeon roost near. It was glorious at twilight to see the pigeons drop down in swarms from the clouds. The sky was full of fairies.” Sometimes he went alone to the pond. In the early morning, he said, borrowing the dewy lines from Tennyson, the trees were wrapped in a happy mist

“Like that which kept the heart of Eden green
Before the useful trouble of the rain.”

The day the Riley lad waded into the sylvan waters, that day “the poet was born in his soul.” For the first time mysterious voices seemed to be talking to him. They were feeble, indistinct, it was true; nevertheless, he was certain their murmur had a personal meaning. The leaves tried to whisper to him. When the breeze

wandered out of the thicket and stirred the waters, he began to wonder what the ripples were saying. There was a "deep, purple wine of shade" in the forest, but he did not see it then,—not for a fortnight of years. It was enough as the seasons came and went that he could distinctly recall the dawn of poetic perception. Whenever he could *vividly* remember the boy he was then, whenever he could wade through "the lake of light" in the woods, whenever he could translate the song of the birds, whenever he could match the music of lispings leaves with the harmony of human emotions, whenever he could bask in the sun of Memory and feel around him the invisible atmosphere of Love, he could write poetry.

Such was the heavenly land of childhood for which the poet could never find jewels enough to diamond with his praise. The green earth vibrated with love and wonder. There was ever a song of dewy mornings, fragrant meadows, and joyous children. Others might sing of Heaven—he rejoiced that they did—but he would sing

"The praises of this lower Heaven with tireless voice
and tongue,
Even as the Master sanctions—while the heart beats
young."

CHAPTER III

SALAD DAYS—A CRISIS—AND A TRADE

MY SALAD days when I was green in judgment," says Cleopatra in the play—"and soaked as a sponge with love-sickness," added Riley, repeating her lines. "*My* salad days," said he, "began when I first fell in love with a schoolgirl and lasted till my majority. If it is a question of verdancy, they lasted longer. They were supposed to be school-days, but since the schoolroom was a secondary matter, I call them salad days. I was uncommonly *green in judgment.*"

The story of a school-day love appears in his "Schoolboy Silhouettes," written at a later period for the *Indianapolis Herald*, and reiterates the opinion expressed in his early poem, "Friday Afternoon," that

"The old school-day romances
Are the dearest after all."

"Mousing about in a garret, among odds and ends, in search of a boot-leg for a garden hinge," Riley comes upon an old McGuffey *Reader*, and promptly there is blown to him "a gust of memory from the Long Ago." He finds on a fly leaf a schoolboy couplet:

"As sure as the vine doth the stump entwine
Thou art the lump of my saccharine."

"And who was the Lump?" he asks. "Let me see—and in memory there suddenly blossoms into life the shy, sweet face of Lily—no matter what the other

name, since a long while ago it was thrown aside like the rubbish in the garret. But Lily, O my Lily, comes back and reigns again; and all the wine of love that ripens in the musty bins of my old heart, boils up and bubbles o'er. We were such friends, you know—such tender, loving friends. I really believe our teacher (an old maid with green spectacles, who had been suffering with neuralgia for a week, and was heartless as a hack-driver)—I really believe she hated us—at least she always kept our desks far apart as the narrow limits of the schoolroom would allow, and even at 'recess' invariably kept one of us in and sometimes both for some real or fancied misdemeanor." The boy had thrown "a kiss at Lily and she had blushed as rosy as the apple she threw him in return." *Miserere domine!* he failed to catch it, and it "went bumping and rattling among the slates and desks, tattling all the tale of love." After a scuffle with the teacher, the schoolboy lover was cornered in the woodbox, savagely punched with the wrong end of the broom—and made to stand with his face to the wall all afternoon. After dismissal he was "dressed down in the good old-fashioned method of the time," and sent home. On leaving the schoolhouse the boy stole a hasty glance through the window and was astonished to discover "the green-eyed dame bending serenely over her desk—eating an apple."

Thus a schoolboy romance was brought to a tragic end, which accounts for his clinging some fifteen years after to a folded leaf from the girl's copy-book, with its quaint old axiom, "There is no ship like friendship." Lily's slender hand had traced the lines. It gave him pleasure to dream tenderly of the school-day episode, while—

"The echo of a measured strain
Beat time to nothing in his head,
From an odd corner of the brain."

His interest in the frivolities of sentiment declined slowly. Up to the advent of his bachelor days, he carried love ditties in his pocket, one in particular by his friend, John Hay, which, he said, "dripped a sticky kind of sweetness that made the society of young girls interesting." Love ditties made the company of maidens "more intoxicating than things that delight the palate."

The real tragedy of the schoolroom however was not the trivial woes of school-day love. It was being indoors. The Riley lad sat near a window and just beyond it was the border-line of the Great Out-of-Doors, which by all the laws of heart and mind he considered his schoolhouse. He was in sight of the National Road. At that particular time, the long highway swarmed with evidences of the Pike's Peak excitement. In summer and autumn there were all sorts of animals in the cavalcade, horses, oxen, mules and donkeys, crazy vehicles of every description, and men with dogs driving hogs and turkeys to market. Riley remembered that there was a cow hitched to a prairie schooner. "Lightning Express" was painted in large letters on the outside of the tent cloth to keep the emigrant's spirits up and the spectators smiling. With such a lively procession passing the window daily it was asking the impossible that a schoolboy should be solemn or even studious. It was as natural for him to laugh at things in that cavalcade as it was for lambs to bleat or the chat to whistle.

His eyes fell one day on a picture that would kindle the interest of the dullest youth. "I recall it as vividly,"

he wrote in the "Silhouettes," "as if the picture were before me now—a bareheaded man, perhaps fifty years old, a fanatic of the time, harnessed like a horse, drawing a two-wheeled cart along the street. He was a well-made man of fifty years, perhaps, rugged as the horse he so oddly represented. He was smoothly shaven as a priest and pink-faced as a country girl. His hair was light and clipped closely to the scalp, as if his brains had grown too warm and needed cooling off. He seemed wholly unconscious of the sensation he was creating in our little village. Flocks of wondering women filled the doors and windows as he passed, while the men-folks dropped their garden tools and stood staring in amazement. Good St. Anthony himself could not have repressed a smile at the antics of the two-legged centaur as he cantered along, clucking to himself and shying occasionally at an oyster-can, or an old boot lying by the sidewalk. Following at his heels, the rag-tag and bob-tail of the town completed the procession. The man halted opposite the schoolhouse where he unhitched himself—frisked out of the harness—snorted and kicked—lay down and rolled over a time or two—shook himself and then abruptly began an incoherent harangue on the subject of religion, interspersing his remarks with love songs composed by himself, printed copies of which he offered to the music-loving public at the rate of five cents per ballad."

Now it is readily seen that here was cause for merriment. The child of the doldrums must admit that such an outbreak would seriously damage the discipline of a schoolroom. "Our thrills of laughter and excitement," said Riley, "should have shaken the walls and rafters; instead, the school had to smother its mirth and put

its merry features to sleep." His favorite teacher, Lee O. Harris, would have let the children have their way for one hour at least. "The schooldame," he rhymed pleasantly,

"Should have promptly resigned her position—
Let them open a new Pandemonium there
And set up a rival Perdition."

Instead of doing that, she was vexed beyond endurance. "Any further manifestation of this uncalled-for levity," she stormed, "will be promptly met with the punishment it richly merits."

Lessons in arithmetic and geography were reviewed and then the class came in the *Fifth Reader* to Irving's "Bobolink." At the same instant the fanatic across the way "burst into an eruption of song." To the Riley youth there was a striking similarity in the happiness of the two strange birds. The man in the street was a bobolink, too, "overcome with the ecstasy of his own music." The lad envied him his freedom as the Irving schoolboy had envied the bobolink the freedom of the meadows. "No lessons, no task, no school: nothing but holiday, frolic, green fields and fine weather." While the class recited the lesson, the youthful Riley gave wings to his imagination. He was enchanted with his foolish fancies. Among them was the frame-work of "a fairy tale, in which a naughty bobolink should be transformed into a great wingless man, who had to work like a donkey, and bray songs for a living."

The street entertainment was fleeting, but beyond it in the fields and woods was a lodestar that drew the lad's affections every day. Rather than "run the gauntlet of cross-examination," he ran to that. "In the

woods," he said, "flinty, two-edged problems of arithmetic do not zip round my ears." "The lad got his education," said his friend Bill Nye, "by listening to the inculcation of morals and then sallying forth with other lads to see if Turner's plums were ripe. What glorious holidays he took without consent of the teacher—rambling in the woods all day, gathering nuts and paw-paws and woodticks and mosquito bites." How inscrutable to the Riley schoolboy were the punishments the teacher inflicted, and they were still inscrutable when he became a man. How pitiless "the melancholy tribunals of visitors," whose way was to look reproachfully upon the ignorance of boys at the blackboard. "Never a sigh," he wrote, "for the forty gipsy-hearted children, panting in vain for

'The feeling of the breeze upon the face—
The feeling of the turf beneath the feet;
And no walls but the far-off mountain-tops.'

Boyhood visions of jolly seclusion on creek bottoms—school books and schoolmasters could not rob the "luckless urchin" of these. "How the sunlight," Riley wrote again, "laughed on afternoons, and danced about the desks, and fluttered up and down the walls on wings of gold; and how it glided with its mystic touch each newborn leaf that trembled on the trees and filled and flooded all the happy world beyond, until the very atmosphere seemed drunken with delight." It is manifest that Riley in his youth had a soul-hunger for freedom.

"His heart no formal schools would brook;
But to himself the world he took."

"My school life," said he, "was a farce all the way through. My *Second Reader* said: 'Some little boys do

not love their books.' I did not love mine. I never heartily learned a school-book lesson in my life. When I did answer a question the answer was whispered in my ear by some one. I copied my blackboard work from the classmate next to me. I could have learned had I tried, but my obstinate nature could not brook the fact that I was sent to school. My nature was full of perversity. I tried McGuffey's *Speller* but the author was so incoherent in his thought I gave up in despair. The book showed haste in preparation and was doubtless an answer to the call of a greedy publisher. I seldom saw the inside of a grammar, nor have I any desire to see one now." (He was forty years old when he said it.) "Language came to me naturally. When I was a boy," he went on, "schools were run on the principle that the hardest method of learning was the best. Flogging was still in favor as was also the stupid old system of forcing boys to learn by rote. My father was an old-fashioned man, very strict in his rule over his children. One of his rules applied to certain books they were forbidden to read. Naturally I wanted to read those books. I did not care a rap for the books he and my teachers prescribed. I read the forbidden books, although I had to steal them from the library to do it. That was my introduction to mythology."

Evidently these are not the words of a dissimulator. He tells the truth about himself, and is not overmuch concerned about the consequences. It happened that way and what had happened could not be recalled.

"I was born thirty years ago," he once said to an interviewer, "and reared at Greenfield—a motherly little old town, at whose apron-strings I am still tied. I was sent to school at a very early age—and then sent

back again. At the very beginning I conceived a dislike for its iron discipline, whose sole object seemed to be to harness every mental energy into brute-like subjection, and then drive it wherever old bat-eyed Tyranny might suggest. I could barely balance myself on one leg when I began to kick in the traces and was speedily labeled a bad boy.

"There was but one book at school in which I found a single interest—McGuffey's *Fourth Reader*." (Love for the *Fifth Reader* came after his school-days.) "It was the tallest book known and to boys of my size it was a matter of eternal wonder how I could belong to the big class in that *Reader*. At sixteen I could seldom repeat the simplest schoolboy speech without breaking down." Once, after hesitating with the usual awkward repetition, he had to sit down "in wordless misery among the unfeeling and derisive plaudits of the school." After that, rather than repeat the harrowing experience, he deliberately chose punishment. Sometimes he practised his declamation half an hour before the ringing of the bell, but his heart failed him when he thought of appearing before the school. Once he prepared to entertain the school with the story of "Casabianca," the gallant youth of thirteen, who stood on the burning deck of a ship-of-war in a battle off the mouth of the Nile. He trained for an old-time Friday afternoon exercise, was told by his teacher to speak out clear and full—not to hang his head—not to let his arms hang down like empty sleeves—but to stand up like a king and look everybody in the face—in short, take "Casabianca" for his model, be brave and speak out like a man.

"All in vain," said Riley. "When Friday afternoon came I failed to appear. There was my hero of the

Nile, hinged to his post like Corporal Doubledick, firm
as a rock and brave as Mars:

‘Beautiful and bright he stood,
As born to rule the storm;
A creature of heroic blood,
A proud, though child-like form.’

There he stood while sailors deserted the sinking ship
and here was I in Greenfield, the most incurable coward
that ever had the honor of birth on Hoosier soil; a
timid, backward boy as I have been a bashful man. In
some way, unaccountable to me, I was bereft of choice.
The schoolroom seemed a little firmament, all bright
with gleaming eyes. I could not keep from blanching.
Doom came unbidden.”

One of the *Fourth Reader* incidents borders on the
pathetic. “My eccentricities,” he observed long years
after the incident when all had been forgiven, “were
not only the dismay of the schoolroom, but a source of
great torment to my father whom I loved and respected,
for all I dodged about a great deal to avoid obeying
him. We were just beginning the new *Reader*, and as
usual I had finished it before the class had read ten
lessons. There were several poems in the book and
one of these, ‘The Dying Soldier,’ I read over and over
again. I had to cry when I read it.”

Old schoolboys and schoolgirls remember it still—a
Blue soldier and a Gray, who would never again see
“the daylight’s soft surprise”—

“Two soldiers, lying as they fell
Upon the reddened clay—
In day-time, foes; at night, in peace,
Breathing their lives away.”

Fate only had made them foes. Death leveled all.

Under the midnight moon and stars—brought face to face before God's mercy-seat, a softened feeling rose:

“Forgive each other while we may;
Life's but a weary game,
And, right or wrong, the morning sun
Will find us, dead, the same.”

So the sun did find them. The Angel of Love came to the battle-plain and mantled their lifeless forms with the vesture of peace:

“And a little girl with golden hair,
And one with dark eyes bright,
On Hampshire's hills, and Georgia's plain,
Were fatherless that night.”

“Well,” Riley continued, “the class came to those pathetic lines. I knew my place in the class and also knew I could not read them before the class without tears. I resolved not to cry in public, and since there was only one way out of it, I ran away. While the teacher's back was turned I slipped through the door into the street and had hardly left the schoolhouse when I met my father, who of course had immediately to know what I was doing away from school. I had just read the life of Washington and concluded I would try the cherry-tree act. I told the truth, explained to my father that I did not want to cry before the school. His eyes flashed wrath like sparks from a furnace fire. I thought that was punishment enough, but when he severely whipped me, I experienced a revulsive feeling and for several years after I seldom thought of him kindly. I don't blame him now. His nature was such that he could not appreciate the situation. He doubtless thought my explanation an excuse to get out of school. But the injustice of it I could not forget.”

The ways of moral mentors, the youthful Riley could

not understand. Indeed, it puzzled him when he grew to manhood. Why (in substance) he asked, should a schoolmaster be thrown into a state of suspense because the boy Audubon devoted more time to birds in the garden than to books on his desk? What is it in the wayward and impulsive natures of boys and girls that their elders can not brook? Why is it that fathers and mothers so covetously cherish the divine command, "Children, obey your parents," and yet find no warm nook within the breast for that houseless truth, the old Lapland song, that goes wailing through the world:

"A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts"?

The sequel to this estrangement from his father occurred twenty years later. After drifting about here and there for a decade, Riley came to try his fortune in Indianapolis. "I began to write poetry," said he, "and in time became rather *notorious* for that. The people of the city made a great deal of me, and now and then rumors of my reputation reached the little town where my father lived. He could not see what the people saw in those things of mine, no more than Mark Twain's father could appreciate the humorous antics and stories the author related of himself in *Tom Sawyer*. He could not see why my dialect was worth so much money, and finally gave up trying to understand it. I went out to see him frequently, and one day persuaded him to return with me. When we reached the city, we went to a clothing store. He was pretty well dressed for a country lawyer but not quite as well as I thought he ought to be for the city. I bought him a new outfit from hat to shoes, and then took him home with me to the Denison Hotel. I told the landlord we wanted the best room in the house.

After dinner we walked about the city together. He was pointed out to friends as my father. I tell you that did me good. It was another proud day in my life. Neither of us recalled the misunderstanding of long ago."

The schoolboy's *Fourth Reader* period was followed by the interval of "worthless accomplishments" he called his "Dime-novel-and-Byronic-verse age." Both home and school forbade those pleasures. In the "Silhouettes" he tells of successful ventures with novels in the schoolroom. He attributed his artifice to an old desk-mate, but he himself was the "unreadable character" he describes. He could secrete things in his desk and have them, as he said, "handy as 'good morning.'" He had nerve and was the leader on truant excursions, as well as the hero of commotions in the schoolroom when he returned with a bottle of grasshoppers in his pocket. If boys got into dilemmas their "old desk-mate" could not get them out of, the case was indeed hopeless. He knew all sorts of turns to make and "wore his conscience as carelessly as he did his cap." He was proud of all emergencies which required his advice, and, when enforcing his opinions, had a peculiar way of impressing his clients on the breast with his fore-finger.

For a while he read novels quite successfully during school hours in the manner of Irving's enjoyment of *Robinson Crusoe*, by snatching hasty moments for reading under the shelter of his desk. He eluded the teacher's eye, he says in the "Silhouettes," by holding the tabooed pamphlet on his geography, and that on his knee with one hand ever ready to shove the story in his desk, leaving his eyes apparently on his lesson. One day the movement of his arm or the guilty look on

his face led to discovery, and he was waylaid by the teacher and punished. Since he defied all rules of time and place, he forthwith provided his need with a clothes-pin (one of the spring variety) and a rubber band attached. Fastening the band to the back of his desk inside, he clamped the novel in the spring, stretched the band forward for the convenience of the eye, and read the alluring pages without fear of detection. When the teacher came peaking around, all he had to do was to raise his thumb and the rubber hid the little old "Prairie Flower" in a jiffy.

Riley really desired an education, but could not find in the schoolroom the nourishment his heart required. He envied the pupils of an older time, whose fortune it was to go to school to Chiron, who taught them horsemanship, how to cure diseases, how to play on the harp, and other branches of knowledge, instead of giving instruction in grammar and arithmetic. And particularly he envied Jason, the athletic youth, who resolved to seek his fortune in the world without asking the teacher's advice or telling him anything about it.

Such a failure as Riley's in arithmetic has seldom been recorded. "I could not," said he, "tell twice ten from twice eternity." History was his *bête noir*. He knew nothing of Columbus, or "the glorious country expressly discovered for the purpose of industry and learning," as his teacher would have him believe. He did not have, as he wrote in one of his prose sketches, "the apt way of skimming down the placid rills of learning." But he did possess the "extraordinary knack of acquiring such information as was not taught at school," and, as he was told, had no place in the busy hive of knowledge. He knew all about Captain Kidd—

If I knew what poets know
I would find a theme
Sweeter than the placid flow
Of the fairest dream,
I would sing of love that lives
On the errors it forgives,
And the world would better grow
If I knew what poets know.

— J. M. Riley.

Nov, 29, '76.

THE POET'S HANDWRITING THE YEAR OF HIS VISION

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If I knew what poets know,
I would find a theme
Sweeter than the placid flow
Of the fairest dream:—
I would sing of love that lives
On the errors it forgives.
And the world would better grow—
If I knew what poets know. —

— James Whitcomb Riley.

HIS HANDWRITING TWENTY-THREE YEARS LATER

If you will write to me
that you are well & all feeling, I will
feel better, though I feel confident you
cannot if you appreciate & true friends
feelings.

Good bye, Miss Good bye
Ad don't forget your friend

Yours Truly
Jas. Whitcomb.

May 1870

could sing the history of the pirate from A to Izzard, sing it with more interest than his schoolmates sang geography. He knew how to slip a chip under the corner of the school clock in order to tilt it out of balance and time, how to ride a horse face backward, and sometimes his story of a gallop to the woods had a demoralizing effect on the "Industrial Hive."

As might be expected, Nemesis crossed his path. The horse ran away and brought his reckless riding to an end. As Riley remarked when older, flavoring his thought with the humor from "Peter Bell": "Old Retribution came down the highway and left me in a half-conscious heap at the roadside with

. . . . 'dim recollections
Of pedlers tramping on their rounds;
Milk-pans and pails; and odd collections
Of saws and proverbs: and reflections
Old parsons make in burying-grounds.' "

Nemesis was present at other times. One winter day she was with George Kingry, a burly youth, and a half-dozen smaller boys, including the Riley lad, while skating on a cranberry marsh. Like so many links in a chain, the boys were holding on to coat-tails when they crashed through the ice into nine feet of water. After floundering about, Kingry caught hold of a willow bough and brought his strand of urchins to shore.

"You seem to have repaired to other shrines besides Tharpe's Pond," said his clergyman friend, Myron Reed, to whom Riley told the incident. "Oh," returned Riley, "I was not Apollo's ward all the time." He once compared notes with Joe Jefferson. "There are certain facts of our boyhood — yours and mine," said Jefferson, "about which there can be no mis-

take. Evidently we were bad boys and hard to manage." On various occasions Riley openly admitted he was not a Model Boy. "Symptoms of evil," he said, "broke out early on me." He was no more a Model Boy on the banks of Brandywine than was Mark Twain on the banks of the Mississippi. The latter's allusion to that character is too good for omission: "If the Model Boy," says Twain, "was in the Sunday-school, I did not see him. The Model Boy of my time—we never had but one—was perfect: perfect in manners, perfect in dress, perfect in conduct, perfect in filial piety, perfect in exterior godliness; but at bottom he was a prig; and as for the contents of his skull, they could have changed place with the contents of a pie, and nobody would have been the worse off for it but the pie."

From Mark Twain to Montaigne—Riley once observed—there is invariably independence of thought and action in the youth of men who have left the impress of greatness on their time. Montaigne was brought up without rigor or compulsion, brought up, as he said, "in all mildnesse and libertie." There was a lack of discipline during his impressionable years, and that, according to Riley, gave charm to the old Frenchman's life and work.

In those days of dissatisfaction and rambling endeavor, there was one exception, that in contrast to his woes of the schoolroom was as sunlight unto lamplight,—the influence upon the Riley youth of a friend whose heart and hand were ever warm and sympathetic, the "Schoolmaster and Songmaster" enshrined in grateful memory, the benign monitor of old Masonic Hall and Greenfield Academy.

It was not *in* the Hall or Academy however that the influence was generative.

The Schoolmaster became the author of such delectable verse as "The Bonny Brown Quail," "Along the Banks of Brandywine," "Moonlight in the Forest," and "Crooked Jim." To the youth with "poetic symptoms" he was from the first a positive inspiration. The scene of that inspiration was chiefly the Schoolmaster's home and vicinity, some two miles from town on Little Brandywine. There the pupil found refuge from grammar and arithmetic. There he was welcome at all hours of the day—and the night, too, for he often remained over, that he might have more abundantly the inspiration he coveted. He was in the academy of outdoor life. He found there, to a large degree, the counterpart of the school he had read about in mythology. He had a singer for a schoolmaster, one who talked about the birth of Time, the wondrous earth, the treasures of the hills, the language of birds, of health and the mission of life, and of mysteries that too long had been hidden from the knowledge of mankind. In that outdoor school, Nature played on "a harp of gold with a golden key." Like the lads of old, the youthful Riley could lie on the dry leaves of the woods and think and dream, and return to the house at night and sleep a wholesome sleep. No waste of time in remorse, with which life in the town sometimes afflicted him. He could grow up to the full height of manhood as Jason had grown under the excellent direction of Chiron. Alas! the Schoolmaster's instruction did not wholly correspond to Chiron's training. It was not ideal. Nevertheless, it was sufficiently enchanting to make the pupil eternally grateful.

The Schoolmaster was a wise guide in reading. He gave the youth Cooper's novels and thus lifted the curtain on American scenery and adventures on the frontier of civilization. Bret Harte told him stories of dare-devil, impulsive, courageous men, toiling in the morning-time of a state—"Bret Harte," the pupil said, "the subtlest manipulator of English on the face of the earth." Dickens enchanted him. The Master thought the pupil should know something of the Waverley novels.

"Read *Ivanhoe*," said he.

"I don't like Scott," returned the pupil.

"Then try *Middlemarch*."

"Too sad; I don't like heavy things; I want to be interested."

As the seasons came and went there was communion with field and woodland. Hints of a coming poet were plentiful—bits of verse here and there on scraps of paper and the fly leaves of old books. Often Master and pupil strolled together through the "sugar orchards" and beyond them into the depths of the wild; often (as the Master wrote)

"They heard the great fond heart of Nature beat,
And felt an impulse in the solitude
To cast themselves in homage at her feet."

When the pupil became ecstatic over the vales of the Elburz Mountains, and the golden prime of old Bagdad days, as told in the Persian tale he was reading, the Schoolmaster pointed to the enchanted land of the present, "right here where we stand," said he, "richer fruited than anything Aladdin ever found in the wizard's cave. A mightier power than slave of lamp or ring waves her wand above the American woods."

When the pupil became a poet he did not neglect the early lesson. "My realm is at home," he wrote;

"Go, ye bards of classic themes
Pipe your songs by classic streams;

I will sing of black haws, May-apples, and pennyroyal;
of hazel thickets, sycamores, and shellbark hickories
in the pathless woods."

Longfellow walking with his favorite teacher amid the groves of Brunswick did not love him more affectionately than Riley loved the Schoolmaster. Both praised their teachers in prose and verse. Riley's tributes in prose were summed up in a brief address before an Indiana State Teachers' Assembly, after he had passed the meridian of life. There was no diminution of gratitude:—

"My last teacher," he said, "I remember with an affection no less fervent than my first. He was a man of many gifts, a profound lover of literature and a modest producer in story and in song, in history, and even in romance and drama, although his life-effort was given first of all to education. To him I owe possibly the first gratitude of my heart and soul, since, after a brief warfare, upon our first acquaintance as teacher and pupil, he informed me gently but firmly that since I was so persistent in secretly reading novels during school hours he would insist upon his right to choose the novel I should read, whereupon the 'Beadle' and 'Munro' dime novels were discarded for masterpieces of fiction; so that it may be virtually recorded that the first study of literature in a Hoosier country school was (perhaps very consciously) introduced by my first of literary friends and inspirers, Captain Lee O. Harris of Greenfield."

Notwithstanding the humdrum of his school-days, Riley was inclined to think of his teachers as a "long list of benefactors." He pleasantly remembered John W. Lacy, his teacher in rhetoric. Even "the rigid gentleman with green goggles" who lifted him from the desk by the ears when he was a boy, and whom he resolved to thrash when he became a man—even he was given a fraction of his gratitude.

Riley had a brief schoolroom experience after his "reconstruction period" with Captain Harris—so brief and incoherent indeed that he seldom honored it with consideration. In January, 1870, the new school building "was ready for occupation," said the county paper. "School opened with 236 pupils." Among them was "James W. Riley." Here seems to have been the first time he was dignified with so long a name. He chose reading, rhetoric and arithmetic. Doctor William M. Pierson, a classmate and lifelong friend, observed that in rhetoric Riley "did not study figures of speech and style; he delved in the beauties of literature found in the quotations." Things went fairly well for six weeks when he received a weekly report which brought his public school-days to an end. There was a black line on the report, "the Black Line of Latitude," said Riley, "that ran across my world on the sixtieth parallel. Below it was the Pit of Failure, the dark discreditable region of reproach and misdemeanors, that kept me in a state of suspense from the hour the bell rang till dismissal. One day I dropped so perilously near the *black line* in Arithmetic, I quit school forever." Like Herbert Spencer, "he could not pass the examination." Like Edison, "he did not have the apparatus."

Prior to quitting school Riley had been chosen editor of *The Criterion*, a school paper to which he gave

WEEKLY REPORT

of James W. Riley - Feb. 18,

1870

For the Week Ending

	Reading	Algebra	Geometry	Arithmetic	History U. S.	Writing	Grammar	Rhetoric	Geography	Latin	Spelling	Physiology	Gen'l Av'ge	Deporment
6 Perfect	6							6					5½	6
5. Good				4½										
4. Passable														
3. Poor														
2 Bad														
1. Very Bad														
0. Failure														

Absent 2 half Days

Tardy 0 times

Rank in Class No. 7

REMARKS These results are obtained by a careful examination of the lessons for the week. Numbers below the **BLACK LINE** show that the pupil has been remiss in duty.

N W. FITZGERALD, Superintendent

(signed) John W. Lacy, Teacher

THE SCHOOL REPORT WITH ITS BLACK LINE OF LATITUDE

the ambitious motto: "*Veni, vidi, vici.*" It "had struggled into existence," he wrote, "under grievous disadvantages." The second issue (and the last), two dozen pages of foolscap, written with lead pencil and bound tastefully in pamphlet form, appeared March 14, 1870, and as customary was read by its editor before a school society. "It was my first venture in the newspaper field," said he, in humorous vein years after, "but I didn't *see* anything nor *conquer* anything. I strangled the infant with a dose of verbosity."

On the last page appeared "A Fragment," which, he sportively said, "was my first poetic effort to see the light of publication." The "Fragment" mourned the decease of the rival school paper, *The Amendment*, whose fate also was to die prematurely:

"Swiftly and surely
With a frenzied cry, demurely
Into the valley of death
Crossed *The Amendment*.

"Quick, like a fo'-hoss team,
With a Shawnee warrior scream
Into the boiling stream
Dove *The Amendment*.

"Still down and down they pass—
Green o'er their graves the grass—
Down in the valley of death
Lies *The Amendment*."

The subject of these pages had now passed into his twentieth year. He had come to a crisis in his life. Indeed the previous summer, while hoeing in a garden with his father one hot evening, he had profited by what may seem to some a crisis of minor significance; but it was not a minor incident to him. His faculties

hungered for expansion in other fields of labor. For the first time his father discovered there was granite in the son's will. "My father," said Riley, recalling the incident, "had moved to the edge of town and was tending a garden. He was a good gardener. I was poor. Like Rumty Wilfer, I had never yet obtained the modest object of my ambition, which was to wear a complete new suit of clothes, hat and boots included, at one time. I desired to go into 'society,' and one evening resolved to make the attempt. I stood before the glass, in an old suit and was putting on a paper collar and a butterfly tie. My big toe was coming through my shoe, and to give my white sock the color of the shoe at that point I stained my toe with ink. With his usual contempt for 'fashion,' my father looked at me from the tail of his eye and said with the curl of the lip, 'Well, my son, now that you are ready to go into *society*, we'll go into the *garden* and hoe weeds.' I followed him. After we had hoed a little while, I fell behind and grew melancholy and saucy. 'You don't seem to like *work*,' said my father sarcastically. 'No!' I thundered. Seizing the end of my hoe-handle with both hands, I flung it into a neighbor lot, leaped the fence and walked down-town, leaving my father white with rage. In about an hour I came back. Leaning against the fence, I said, 'Father, I am here, not to hoe weeds, but to tell you I am sorry I spoke to you in anger.' He gazed at me in astonishment. The silence was painful. Then he said in a tone of tenderness I had not heard before, 'My son, come down to the office to-night. I want to talk to you.' At the office we came to an understanding. He went his way and I went mine."

Tradition has it that he ran down an alley from the

garden muttering to himself "The Farewell to the Farm," a country poet's fiery resolve,—

"Not to be a farmer,
Not to plow the sod,
Nor hop another clod."

"Was it tradition?" he was asked some thirty years after. "Fact *and* tradition," he promptly returned; "I used language that would sear the walls of a synagogue. I resolved never to work with a hoe again—and I never did." For several years following, his paternal relations were strained—strained at times to a tension that was painful—by just such a grievance as that which beset Mark Twain and *his* father. They were almost always on distant terms—as Twain said, they were in a state of armed neutrality.

Riley's garden resolution may seem to some an abrupt disapproval of farming. Nothing could be more foreign to truth. In his sight, a thrifty cornfield was as essential to the progress of man as a poem. But there were men designed of Heaven for the agricultural pursuit. He was not one of them. He had labored in his little solitude long enough. There was budding within him "a desire to tread a stage on which he could take longer strides, and speak to a larger audience." Or to say it as Myron Reed said it: "You can not make a prosperous farmer out of Robert Burns. One line of power is enough for one man."

In the spring of 1870, Riley went to work for "a shoemaker of renown," affectionately known about town as old Tom Snow. He had clerked in the store but a few weeks when its proprietor was laid in the grave, the store taken for debt, and the clerk thrown out of employment. The greatest trial however in that

year of shadow, the trial that most deeply affected his future, was the loss of his mother, who died suddenly one Tuesday morning in August. The bereavement caused a complete change in his life. It sent him into the world to make his own living, and in numerous ways it was a forlorn road he had to travel.

A few hours after her death he walked alone through a cornfield to a favorite retreat south of the railroad, an old clearing, where on a later day (as will be seen) he received his message from the South Wind and the Sun. But on that particular forenoon he looked straight up from the tall iron-weeds into God's great lonesome sky,—

“Bowed with silence vast in weight
As that which falls on one who stands
For the first time on ocean sands,
Seeing and feeling all the great
Awe of the waves as they wash the lands.”

“I was alone,” said he, “till as in a vision I saw my mother smiling back upon me from the blue fields of love—when lo! she was young again. Suddenly I had the assurance that I would meet her somewhere in another world. I was gathering the fruit of what had been so happily impressed on me in childhood. I had seen that the world is a stage. Now I saw that the universe is a stage. Another curtain had been lifted. My mother was enraptured at the sight of new scenery. It was the dream of Heaven with which ‘Johnny Appleseed’ had impressed my mother in the Missis-sinewa cabin.”

Forward from that lonely hour there was a light on Riley's path that ever seemed the refulgence of his mother's smile. When the memory of the vision had been hallowed by length of years, he left a transcript

of it in two delicate stanzas he entitled "Transfigured." Childhood and immortal youth were synonymous:

"A stately figure, rapt and awed,
In her new guise of Angelhood,
Still lingered, wistful—knowing God
Was very good;

"Her thought's fine whisper filled the pause,
And, listening, the Master smiled,
And lo! the stately Angel was
A little child."

From his cradle his mother's voice had ever been a living song of sympathy. There was a poetic charm in her name—Elizabeth. Its cadence lingered as tunelessly on his lips as the music of love in his heart. Recalling stories of her joy and heroism in days of poverty and suffering, her "perseverance under all doubts and dangers," he thought of her as the "Little Nell" of the frontier—"Little Nell" she was, with the additional crown of marriage and motherhood. Like the heroine of fiction, she had lead a wandering life. Her parents had brought her through a wilderness of wild animals and pioneer settlements. From the "Old North State" up through the Blue Ridge solitudes she had come, through Cumberland Gap and on through the wilds of Kentucky—a journey of some seven hundred miles in a one-horse wagon. The son dearly loved the tradition of his mother's girlhood days in Randolph County. He saw her strolling away from her cabin home to new scenery in the forest. From her he had inherited the spirit of investigation. As her chief delight was to trace tributaries and rivulets to their sources, so was he joyous when tracing threads of thought and action back to their foun-

tainheads. Her maidenhood on the Mississinewa was to him an ideal life. The stream was for her the "Beautiful River" that rose somewhere in the Great Buckeye Woods and ran merrily by her door. As she stood there in the light of morning skies, she was his dream of the "Golden Girl," the idyllic Muse that came to accompany him the year he caught the vision of his mission.

To have been loved, it has been finely said, is better than to have built the Parthenon. Elizabeth Marine Riley was loved. She was the heroine of trials which are not chronicled in earthly records, but in all ways she was upheld and sustained by the ties of friendship. She was as hopeful as Spring. She augured the harvest of universal good. In old Persian phrase (to repeat what her son often repeated), "taking the first step with the good thought, the second with the good word, and the third with the good deed, she entered Paradise."

A turn in the road had really come. The invisible Messenger had passed, the mother had gone to a land where there are no tears, and home ties had been broken. He was no longer a schoolboy but J. W.—sometimes James W. Riley. Fate had denied him a clerkship in a store, and he had been, to quote a schoolmate, "the most celebrated failure in arithmetic in the county." Old folks prophesied life failure. "They did not think I would amount to much at home," said Riley, recalling the days. "Being a lawyer my father believed in facts. He had little use for a boy who could not learn arithmetic. There were others of the same opinion. My schoolmates had an aptitude for figures and stood well in their classes. The result was half the town pitied me. Again and again I was told I

would have to be supported by the family. Something had to be done. I knew it—and my father knew it. So I went over to Rushville to sell Bibles.” The father was doubtful of the issue, as is shown in the following letter:

Greenfield, Indiana,
December 19, 1870.

My Dear Boy:

I have been patiently waiting for a letter from you and have received none. Scarcely an hour passes without my thinking of you and wondering how you are getting along? how you are doing? and how you are managing? I have had much more experience in the world than you. It is all important that you associate with none but those of good character, that you be self-reliant and aim high, and suffer no stain to attach to your conduct. I would like to counsel and advise with you. Please write me fully and confidently, and all reasonable assistance in my power I will render. We are all well, and have been anxiously looking and waiting for you to come home. Somehow I don't think your book business is paying but I may be mistaken. I hope I am, and would like to know more about it, and more about the man who is with you. Don't fail to write immediately. I will be absent until Wednesday or Thursday in Hamilton County, defending two men charged with murder.

With a Father's deep solicitude for you,
I am very truly and affectionately,
R. A. RILEY.

“It turned out,” said Riley, “that citizens of Rushville had all the Bibles they needed; they had not time to read those they had.” So in the first weeks of 1871 he found himself with a Number 5 paint brush and a bucketful of paint under the eaves painting a house in Greenfield. “I was not quite so melancholy as Tom Sawyer,” said he, “but the walls of that house did have

a far-reaching look like a continent, just as the long, unwhitewashed fence looked to Tom."

Riley had learned house-painting on hot summer days a year or so before. "Painting frame houses was my vacation," said he. Having become an efficient house-painter, he and two associates contracted with the trustees to paint the new Public School building. "The dome," said Riley, "looked two hundred feet high. Being the most nimble, I had to paint it. We attached a rope to the pinnacle and with brush and bucket I scaled it over the cornice. It was perilous, suspended there between heaven and earth. I did not stop then to write a couplet. I did not revel in the Rollo Books." A friend wrote him that his climbing the paint ladder was "typical of the coming man on the ladder of fame. There is not much danger," said the friend, gently referring to his habits, "while standing on the lower round, but beware when your feet stand on the rounds near the top. I am anxious to see the day when the world will appreciate you for what you are worth, but I do not want you to fly the track. Put on plenty of sand, and *reverse* on the down grade."

His house-painting was the attainment of one or two summer vacations. The sign-painting trade required more time. Symptoms of his ability in that line were seen in his school-days. Very early he developed a "knack for drawing." School books, scraps of paper and old envelopes bore evidence of his gift. Cunning borders and clever tail-pieces were found on almost every page. He made sketches with a goose-quill pen. With no outside aid, he surpassed the efforts of many students under the guidance of masters. He aspired to be a portrait painter, "improvised a studio," and at the age of fourteen drew a creditable sketch of his

father sitting by the fireside. Standing before a mirror he made a crayon drawing of himself. His sister Elva remembered crayons of George and Martha Washington, and with what pride he pointed to them on his "studio" wall.

Various suggestions for drawings came from *Montieth's Geography*. One illustration in particular he remembered—"Daniel Boone with the melancholy hounds and a deceased deer at his feet." Another was the picture of the Hoosier State seal. What the lad did with that drawing was afterward worked up for amusement into a prose sketch. The pioneer in the picture, a stalwart man in shirt-sleeves, was hacking away at a tree without deigning to notice the stampeding buffalo. Riley took his "graphic pen and mounted each plunging buffalo with a daring rider holding a slack bridle-rein in one hand, and with the other swinging a plug hat in the most exultant and defiant manner."

Riley learned sign-painting within a year under the rambling instruction of a veteran of the trade. His father paid the tuition in the hope that it would develop into something better for the son, since he was making such hopeless progress in the schoolroom. To some it seemed a step down the ladder from the Academy to a paintshop. The shop, a ramshackle establishment near the railroad, was a group of old granaries, with their walls full of knot-holes. There was an adjoining apartment filled with a family of noisy negro children whose father, as Riley phrased it, "was the most competent stutterer in the county." Riley's course in painting included graining, penciling and a few short lessons in landscape. He did not "block out" as did the other beginners. He

simply did the work offhand with an artistic efficiency peculiar and pleasing to himself. He measured with the eye, but he was as painstaking and exacting as he was afterward in the preparation of manuscripts. When lettering he often made capitals from graceful patterns which he himself had designed.

That he was soon beyond the aid of his instructor was proved by a picture of a greyhound on a sign which he painted that "was so perfect, children going by were afraid of the dog." Riley's native town began to take notice of him. His drawings and his accidental jingles were quoted by friends as "proofs of his inspiration," though the little circle of skeptics around him still prophesied failure. He bestowed on them, it is said, something more than the contempt of silence, and resolved to prove to his native town that it had wronged a man who deserved to succeed.

Having learned his trade, and having quit school, Bible-selling, and house-painting, Riley established himself in a shop of his own. Customers would find him "at the head of the stairs, over the drug store." He advertised on a large card with pictorial designs, which he was permitted to hang in the post-office. This caught the attention of the county papers. "Our young friend, J. W. Riley," said the *Democrat*, "has a sign for himself that is a credit to him." "That sign in the post-office," said the *Commercial*, "is attracting considerable attention and much merriment." A feature of the sign was a silhouetted figure, a lad standing with two fingers upraised and outspread—the signal among the boys that there was a good time coming at the Old Swimmin' Hole. "While waiting for the turn of fortune," said Riley, "I covered all the barns and fences

with advertisements. All the while I was nibbling at the rhyme-maker's trade, and this was a source of irritation to my father. The outlook was not encouraging. He thought I should devote my time exclusively to painting." That the painter made some money by the way is shown by memoranda and receipts. These also show a demand for him away from home.

MEMORANDA

Go to Palestine to-morrow at twelve o'clock to letter wagon for L. H. Clayton. Terms \$2.50 and expenses.

Greenfield, Indiana.

For painting signs for Poulson & Jones, as follows:

3 doors -----	\$5.00
1 gilt sign, 2 sides -----	\$5.00
1 gilt sign, 1 side -----	\$2.50
1 window blind -----	\$2.00

Total -----	\$14.50
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Received payment,

J. W. Riley.

"It was holding the wolf by the ears," said he, referring to "the time that tried his *soles*." "Like Jason, I had but one sandal to my foot." He went on to tell how he was pursued by creditors, but there was more humor than insolvency in what he said. "I kept a lookout at every alley and corner. If any one looked at me I fled like quicksilver. I shifted from place to place, like George Morland. I was acquainted with every spot of secrecy in Center Township."

As he drew a worn memorandum book from his pocket, a chum asked, "Is that to remind you of a sign to paint in Fountaintown?" "Not exactly," replied Riley, "I enter in this book the names of creditors

whose door I can not pass any more. This dinner we have enjoyed on credit to-day at the Guymon House closes Main Street. I bought a pair of pumps on State Street last week which forbids more buying in that quarter. There is but one avenue open—South Street—and I shall have to stop that to-night with a bag of meal. The roads are closing in all directions and unless my uncle in the Lone Star State sends me a remittance soon, I shall have to go round by Tailholt to get home.”

It has been said that “no background of poverty or early hardships can be provided for this poet of the people.” But this assertion is not supported by the facts. “We were poor,” said Riley, referring to the loss of his father’s law practice after the Civil War, “so poor we had to move into a cheerless house in the edge of a cornfield, our homestead having been lost in a luckless trade for land on the prairies.” He went on in a jocular way to recount his experience with old-time house parties, how he had folded his overcoat on his arm to hide the rents in the lining, and how he had worn his Derby hat wrong side foremost to make less conspicuous a hole in the brim.

In explanation of property losses it is due the father to add that he suffered injuries for life from the explosion of a shell at the battle of Rich Mountain. The consequent loss of power was followed by the loss of prestige and property. He had what Goethe’s father had, “a bent for puttering,” but this could not be said of him before his injury on the battle-field.

The poverty of those days must not be construed into a state of indigence. As Riley observed on another occasion, “We were poor but not pitifully poor. When I was a boy there were no very rich nor very poor. We

drive through the country in a carriage. A tousled, barefooted, bareheaded boy in overalls steps into the dog fennel at the side of the road to let us pass, and some one remarks, 'Poor child!' *Poor?* he is *rich*; every day three meals of potatoes and corn bread and milk—freedom, fresh air, miles of landscape, blackberries and watermelons in season and walnuts for Christmas. One summer while my father was gone to war, we were so poor my mother had to pin on my clothing. After a splash in the Old Swimmin' Hole, it took the help of two boys to pin it on. Yet I was rich. The lads of to-day have no such shady bower for splashing as I had. Lincoln had a rich boyhood. To be born in a log cabin is to be rich. I came within an ace of missing it. Had Lincoln been born amid a wilderness of brick and lath and nails and mortar, he never would have become the Savior of his Country. I once heard a speaker say of the cabin in Kentucky that it is now lifted and set on one of the shining summits of the world—and so it is. Lincoln was a rich man. He lived in the American woods. They said it was a mental wilderness. It was a mental university. How rich he was with that handful of seven books by the cabin fire. What value he attached to his visit to this world, every day a day of discovery, a new survey of facts and principles, every day reaching out like the wide-spreading trees around him for soil and water. I would rather see what he saw and loved than see the sky-line of a great city."

Riley always made it clear that he would rather have the Lincoln experience than suffer the blight of prosperity. Once after hearing David Swing he contemplated a lecture on "The Sunny Side of Poverty." We all have known, Swing had said, some poor girl to

bend over her sewing and sing far into the night, not because sewing and poverty are sweet, but because the cares and sorrows of life had been baptized in the great flowing river of love. "My mother," said Riley, "was baptized in that river. That baptism revealed the heroic in her—

Only those are crowned and sainted
Who with grief have been acquainted.

In days of prosperity she was beautiful. She was heroic and saintly during the war and after, in the days of adversity."

"The poet of the people should wear overalls," Riley remarked to a wealthy friend, while winning his way to distinction. The remark was not made in jest. It was no vain pretense of sympathy for those in straightened circumstance. He had met the requirements. He was entitled to his prosperity. He had not capitalized his hardships. He had not bewailed his fate. He had accepted what the wheel of fortune brought him, not always contentedly, but never in a vindictive spirit. He observed with much glee that it was the loss of a sandal that sent Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece. Thus by joking about his lot, the sign-painter endeared himself to his friends and ultimately to the American people. "Poverty," he affirmed, "is the north wind that lashes men like Mark Twain and Lincoln into Vikings—women like May Alcott, it makes a queen of the earth. She was enshrined in the heart of mankind, not because she had to do second work including washing at two dollars a week—not that. Her history is inspiring because she rose above two dollars a week. She smiled at the thumping of fate. It made her, as she herself said, a sweet, ripe old pippin before she died."

Though the seasons brought hard times to Riley, his signs brought prosperity to others. Like the rustic in *As You Like It*, he was shepherd to other men, and did not shear the fleece he grazed.

“Hart and Thayer
Hart and Thayer
All the wool
You have to spare
Take it along
To Hart and Thayer.”

Thus ran the homely jingle on sign-boards nailed up on the highways leading into town—"the first rhyme," said a thrifty farmer, "that ever stimulated sheep growing in Hancock County." It proved to be such a hit and brought so much business to the firm that other signs appeared on roads farther away from the center of trade. "Shilling poetry," the farmers called it, and well they might, for it raised the price of wool. Rhyme-spinning was vying with the song of the loom. Greenfield drew trade from neighboring counties to the extent that the wool industry assumed the appearance of "smuggling," by which was meant the sale of wool in Greenfield that, by the unwritten laws of trade, belonged to merchants in Newcastle and Shelbyville. Loss to those towns seemed to require legislation, or the attention of a monarch like Edward III to prohibit the exportation of wool "under pain of life and limb." "Wool was not a drug on the market," a merchant humorously remarked. "Flemish weavers began to look our way. Business vied with trade from Argentina and the Falkland Isles."

The sign-painter, it may be observed parenthetically, was beginning the search for a Golden Fleece, but he

had not dreamed of his efforts affecting trade in pure bred merinos and Silesian wools. It may also be said that his profession was not wholly modern, although many features of it were peculiar to his time, several originating with him. Nor was the occupation wholly commonplace, and certainly it was not menial, even though Riley "had but one coat to his back, and that had frazzled sleeves and patches on the elbows." Signboards had been painted by such great artists as Hogarth, Wilson and Correggio. A few years before Riley climbed to the roof of the Greenfield school building, Archibald Willard, famous for his painting, "The Spirit of '76," was gilding wheels and axletrees in a carriage factory in Ohio.

All in all, in this transitional period, Riley was not in bad company.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARGONAUT AMONG OLD BOOKS

HE WAS fresh and vigorous; he was animated with hope; he was incited by desire; he walked swiftly over the valleys and saw the hills gradually rising before him."

This paragraph from an old school *Reader* gave Riley elemental pleasure. "Just to repeat it," said he, "gives delight like the music of warblers or the fragrance of May-apples." It was from a lesson entitled "A Picture of Human Life." He approved the picture, drawing the line only on the counsel of the hermit who discouraged the indulgence of pleasure. There were, to be sure, pleasures that brought dissatisfaction in the wake of the disasters attending them; but there was a universe of pleasure that did not end in prostration, remorse and suffering. The hermit scorned enjoyment. He limited travelers to the main road. They were not to forsake the common track, which was the dusty, uneven way of the plain. They were to forego the pleasure derived from the music of birds, the sparkle of fountains and the murmur of water-falls. To mount a hill for a fresh prospect, or trace the course of a gentle river among the trees was to overspread the sky with clouds and invite the tempest.

Riley promptly disregarded the hermit's counsel. Poetic natures the world over, he thought, should create and discover scenes of happiness. This meant for the discoverers release from custom. Without such release

the light of their lives was lost. To travel the main highway exclusively as the hermit advised, was to court mediocrity. It was to impoverish human resources. The main road for the indifferent, those who lost themselves in the crowd; but when a young man had in his heart something that distinguished him from the common run of men, he necessarily had to depart from the beaten path. The very law of his existence meant a new road, to travel onward along which meant gardens of pleasure. To enjoy these gardens was not, in consequence, to lose the happiness of innocence, not to forsake the paths of virtue. One could make life picturesque without indulging evil passions.

Thus it was, as a young man entering "the arena of the firmament," that Riley made his own picture of human life. In reality there were *two* pictures. As he grew to manhood, these took definite form and became paramount in importance, the one blending with the other. He divided the world into prose and poetry. Whenever what he thought or did related to the prosaic side of existence, he was a Pilgrim. From early manhood he desired to write a narrative poem of considerable length to be entitled "The Mayflower Voyage," the mission of the poem being to make it a little clearer to the readers that his life was just such a voyage. By idealizing incidents of courage and self-sacrifice he hoped to develop a dramatic narrative that would ennoble the perseverance, refresh the faith, and stimulate the hope of the people. Although he failed to write the poem, he did not fail to experience the Pilgrim's fate, "the fate of all men," said he, "who grapple courageously with the problems of human progress. All citizens worthy the name make the Pilgrim voyage, and it is a piece of good fortune that they

have to make it. Trial grows character. The lives of our statesmen were foreshadowed in the stormy passage of the Mayflower. Necessarily they were men of sorrows. The Ship of State gave them many sleepless nights. Now, paradoxical as it seems, there are in the experience of the poet as in the lives of statesmen, days dark as night. His bark, like the Ship of State, is often driven through perilous waters. Like the Pilgrim, the poet is buffeted by billows within and without. He is destined to follow his star in the pathless way through fogs and blinding rain. It does not strain the truth to say that he is tossed on frozen shores bleak and drear as the coasts of death."

"Such is life," said Riley, "when yoked to the prosaic side of human existence." But there was another picture and with it he was enraptured. He was a Pilgrim, but chiefly he was an Argonaut in search of a Golden Fleece. The glow of feeling in the man in the spring days of his genius when he found what he called "a wisp of the Fleece," and within it the *thread of gold* for a poem (the climax in the last stanza as all Riley readers know), when he found that, his rapture was as heavenly as the divinity of youth. Sometimes the work of a single night sparkled with jewels, and when daybreak came he had the *threads* for several poems. They were the gifts of the gods. Lest he lose them, he wrote the stanza immediately, which accounts for the singular fact that he often wrote the last stanza first when building a poem.

His Argonautic dream dates back to boyhood when he first began to think of life as a voyage of discovery, back to the days when Uncle Mart and Almon Keefer held the children captive with fairy stories, when little "Bud" lay on his back in the shade of—

“The red-apple-tree, with dreamy eyes
And Argo-fancies voyaging the skies.”

The particular book that gave birth to the dream of the Golden Fleece was Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, which just then was coming over the Alleghanies in its first edition. “This enterprise, you will understand,” Uncle Mart read from the *Tales*, “was of all others, the most difficult and dangerous in the world. In the first place, it would be necessary to make a long voyage through unknown seas. There was hardly a hope, or a possibility, that any young man who should undertake the voyage would either succeed in obtaining the Golden Fleece, or would survive to return home and tell of the perils he had run.” In simple English, writing poetry, to say nothing of the quest for Golden Fleece in other fields, was one of the most difficult things to do under the sun. The youthful Riley however saw not the difficulties attending the voyage. Children then as now were “blessedly blind” to facts such as these. His interest centered in the galley and the heroes with helmets and shields who were willing to row him, if need be, “to the remotest edge of the world.” Not the least among his heroes being Orpheus the harper, who played upon the lyre so sweetly that the beasts of the fields capered to the music. The dangers and difficulties were reserved for the school of experience.

Tales of other heroes, the Argonauts of Forty-Nine, were heard in those days. These kindled in the Riley youth the spirit of adventure. His earliest recollections were of the gold-fever excitement. Soon after 1849, the National Road became a westward stream of vagrants. The stream passed his childhood door. The Overland Route through the South Pass to San Francisco was advertised in Indiana communities. Young

men having packs and good animals were asked to fall into the ranks and cross the continent. They could reach gold in one hundred and twenty days. They were told the land by the sundown sea was "the finest *new* country of which the human race has any knowledge." The lure of the Far West was very great. It had drawn Bret Harte to the Golden Gate at the age of seventeen. A few years later Mark Twain had gone bounding in a stage-coach over the Great Divide to Nevada. "It was an assemblage of *young* men," said Twain, referring to the driving population of the mining regions—"not simpering, dainty kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans—none but erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants—the most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land."

When a spectacle like that smites the vision of a young man, he is likely to lift his moorings and follow the adventuring crowd. But the ways of Fortune do not all lie to westward. It turned out that the Golden Fleece which Riley sought was not on the hillsides of the American Fork, nor was California to be his "Land of the Afternoon."

Soon after leaving Greenfield to try his fortune in other Hoosier towns, he chanced to hear Bret Harte lecture on "The Argonauts of Forty-Nine." After that for several years he was dominated by the spirit of adventure, although it never led him to distant lands. The Hoosier world was large enough. The humorous Moral to *Roughing It* he took seriously:

"If you are of any account, stay at home and make your way by faithful diligence."

As he looked out over his native state, he was filled like Orpheus with a desire to sing of a wondrous world, and how all things spring from love. He talked extravagantly of the Golden Fleece. His heart was aflame in "The Argonaut," one of his early poems, a copy of which he carried from town to town in his pocket till it was worn threadbare and lost. He read it aloud when he could find a friendly listener. One stanza was decidedly Argonautic:

"And mistily as through a veil,
I catch the glances of a sea
Of sapphire, dimpled with a gale
From Colchis blowing, where the sail
Of Jason's Argo beckons me."

As he bowled through the country, he was "a Forty-Niner—the blessedest creature on the earth"—but never when he thus thought of himself was he a California gold-seeker. Always he had in mind the joyous year of his birth, and how he had started from the box cradle on his life voyage of discovery.

Riley was a Pilgrim when hampered with the routine and cares of business, when struggling with debt, when the day was a series of banalities and distractions. But he was an Argonaut from the cradle, and that picture of human life, like the *fairly interest* in his work, was always with him when he was doing what Heaven designed him to do. Since he was chiefly an Argonaut, the reader is asked to think of him as such in the following chapters—and first to follow him in his quest for Golden Fleece among old books.

The records of a Greenfield Sunday-school once in-

cluded a report by J. W. Riley, secretary *pro tempore*. He and his companions had wandered into the church out of the rain. In the absence of the regular secretary, he was asked to write the minutes and if so inclined to make some remarks. His report was a rare departure from custom, his language being an alarm to the "ancient worthies," the dismay of the ignorant, and a surprise to all. Never before had those church walls echoed a phraseology so verbose and unaccountable. On leaving the church, a wide awake member of the flock seized the secretary *pro tem.* cordially by the arm and requested him to come again. "You serve us," said he, "and sleep-worship in this sanctuary will write over the door of its departure the days that are no more." It seems that Riley had by design or accident found a collection of good old English books. Having browsed at will on "that fair and wholesome pasturage," he was on that Sunday morning, as on other occasions, eager to exercise his new vocabulary.

It was Riley's fortune to love the beauty and knowledge he gathered from books for their own sake. Like most boys, he began by reading light novels. Though they were trashy, he gleaned from them more or less information and a knowledge of words. Happily, there lived near, a wise mother, Rhoda Houghton Millikan, who had her own method of luring boys and girls to good books. She was not alarmed when they began to devour dime novels. She placed a copy of *The Sketch Book* on the center table where her son and the "Riley boy" might find it. "Let them nibble at it," said she, "and they will come to the good books by and by." And they did. After reading *The Sketch Book*, Riley called for more and was given *The Alhambra*, and Irving's biography of Oliver Gold-

smith. Thus he ascended the Catskills with Rip Van Winkle, thus he was lured to castles in Spain, and thus did the author of *The Traveller* kindle Riley's passion for wandering, and acquaint him with the pleasures and miseries of the scribbling tribe.

It was fortunate for Riley that Mrs. Millikan was a friend of the best literature. He had once been her pupil. She was a woman of heroic type, having reared her family of five children after her husband had been lost—with other Argonauts—in the California gold fields. In her youth she had lived near the Green Mountains. Irving was her patron saint. When she said, "I love him dearly," the boys knew she did. After Riley's first poem had been printed in a local paper, she spoke to him of his future, recalling what she had read in an old prospectus of the first edition of *The Sketch Book*. "Irving," she said, "did not aspire to high honors; it was the dear wish of his heart to have a secure and cherished though humble corner in the good opinion and kind feelings of his countrymen. This, James, was a worthy ambition. *You* can have a similar corner in the hearts of your countrymen."

To Mrs. Millikan (and a London shoemaker, as the reader will see elsewhere) is due the credit for opening to Riley the door to good literature. She was the first of the Greenfield prophets, the first to see in "the strange young man" the possibilities of authorship, and it was her happy fortune to see him rise to the summit of his fame.

About the middle of the last century a New Harmony philanthropist established in Greenfield the McClure Township Library, a collection of three hundred volumes, including a series on *Success in Life*, the

Queens of England, Macaulay's England, the Works of Washington Irving, the Rollo Books, Cooper's Novels, Prescott's Histories, and a full line of the poets. The Library had a precarious existence. From its first home in the county Court House, it drifted successively into the schoolhouse, a boot and shoe store, a grocery store, until finally it was scattered among families of the town. But wherever its home, it was a Mecca for young Riley. A few histories he read, but with little interest. His taste ran to fiction and poetry. He read *Weem's Life of Washington*, which in spite of the fables, he said, "is a better book than the later lives with the fable left out. Lincoln grew up with that book. It is more nutritious than the dull chronicle of juiceless facts."

It may be observed in passing that Riley did not limit truth to fact. He liked immensely what Thomas Brackett Reed said about it. "Why," asked Reed, "are stories of great men invented? Because the truth is deeper than the fact." "Truth," said Riley, "is a limitless realm; it is universal; it lies back, around, above and below our feeble expression of it and the expression great men give it. A thing need not necessarily happen in order to be a fact. If it is told exactly the way it would happen if it did happen, it is as absolutely true as if it had already happened. We are told that there was no such Washington as we fable—and it is true. In other words we have made and are still making our Washington. The Washington the people love is not solely the Washington of history, but the larger Washington, the cumulative dream of the National Mind."

In the Township Library Riley also found the *Life of Daniel Boone*, the *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Don Quixote*, *Robin Hood*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and what was to him

dearest of all, the *Arabian Nights*. "Its author was no pessimist," he remarked in after years, "although far away in the Persian desert. He was the Robert Louis Stevenson of his time; he fed the hungry, put a coat on the world's back, built a warm fire for its comfort and bade it be of good cheer. I can never efface from memory the scenes of that book. They have been theme and inspiration to me. To this day when I sniff coal-oil, it is sweet as violets, for I think of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp. I see the huge iron door at my feet. It is raised for me; I descend the narrow steps and pass through the caves of riches and find jewels on the trees."

But the leaven from the Library, the most generative and far-reaching in its effect was *The Lives of Eminent British Painters and Sculptors*, five leather-bound volumes with a long title, which, as Bill Nye might remark, was simplified for talking purposes. "Where's Riley?" some one asked. "Oh," answered an old-timer, "he's up there readin' them British Books." Thus the volumes were designated, and affectionately, too, when it was known how dearly the young Argonaut loved them. They were

"The pleasant books, that silently among
The household treasures, took familiar places,
And were to him as if a living tongue
Spake from the printed leaves or pictured faces."

When the remnant of the old Library was scattered among the Greenfield patrons, by common consent the "British Books" became Riley's property, and thus it was that he read them again and again. Almost all that he accomplished in those years of growing manhood was directly or indirectly traceable to the influence of those books, and even after his fame was assured, still

those household treasures spoke to him from their printed pages. In them he found excuses for his conceits and eccentricities. His interest in grotesque combinations, his sympathy for illiterate people, his love of seclusion, his scorn of extravagance, his freedom from the shackles of imitation, his determination to reach the goal on an individual road—all had a parallel in the lives of those British artists.

“Fair Britannia,” a waggish rhymer once wrote,

“Flung to her right and her left,
Funny people with wings,
Among elephants, Roundheads,
And Catapa kings”;

but the funniest, the oddest, the most whimsical of all, the wag averred, were her children of genius known as painters and sculptors. Riley agreed with the wag. As he saw it, the artists touched life at almost every conceivable point. “They were erratic men, hot-tempered,” said he; “they were headstrong and presumptuous, they manifested early proofs of inspiration, they were divinely interesting, they were good, they were bad, they were weak, they were strong, wise, foolish—so are men of genius in all times.”

In the “British Books” Riley found Sir Thomas Lawrence, who taught that a man should be on good terms with himself, the prudent artist who veiled his prosperity that he might have the applause of his friends.

There was Sir Joshua Reynolds, who held that drudgery lay on the road to genius, the painter who drew excellence from innumerable sources, paid attention to all opinions, and obtained valuable hints from the rudest minds. And Cosway, who formed good resolutions by day and broke them when the lamps were lighted; and Northcote, who had no



THE POET'S FATHER, CAPTAIN REUBEN A. RILEY



OLD SHOE-SHOP
Wherein the youth learned to love Dickens

first out-flashings of genius, but grew slowly up into eminence year by year—the artist who all his life was afflicted with “false spelling”—the youth whose interest in *Jack the Giant Killer* never diminished—the man who could never open the book without his eyes filling with tears.

There was Gainsborough, the son of the cloth-worker, the “father of modern landscape,” and Mortimer, frequenting sequestered places on the seacoast amid smugglers. And Copley, who refused to offer up his time and money on the altar of that expensive idol, a wife; and John Flaxman, the little sculptor, who showed that wedlock is for an artist’s good rather than his harm.

There was William Hogarth, who taught that the study of nature is the short and safe way to knowledge—Hogarth, the painter of the *Distressed Poet*, an artist famed for his humorous insight, his power of storytelling, a genius of the first order, who proved that entertainment and information are not all that is required of genius, that the public wish to be elevated by contemplating what is noble, warmed by the presence of the heroic, and charmed and made happy by the sight of purity and loveliness.

So the list continued. There were Harlow, Romney, Bird, and Opie—and West, whose fame, though great, was not purchased by trials, and hence was not enduring. There were Bonnington and Blake and Barry—all in all, a goodly company for a young man in search of a Golden Fleece. The books were stories of good old English pluck and heroism, full of folly, of heart-sorrow, of obstacles surmounted, of rectitude and renown.

The poet’s friend, Myron Reed, was always able to

see primary significance in obscure incidents that had been cast aside by the historians and biographers. "Abraham Lincoln," said he, "had some excellent company at New Salem—a village loafer, a dry-goods box whittler, and an expert black bass fisherman, who knew the best books on earth. There is at least one such man in every village. Whitcomb Riley had such a man. They do not make or wreck railroads, but they help boys to know what to read and what not to read. One of them is a small Socrates in a small town."

The Greenfield Socrates was a jolly Englishman, old Tom Snow, "the first man of letters," said Riley, "the town ever knew"—a rare old shoemaker who knew what elders often do not know, that it is not wise for "October to be always preaching at June." Riley traced his literary lineage back to the Englishman's ancestry in London. Tom Snow was Riley's Old Man with a chronic supply of family troubles, who, despite them, never grew old, never became "stale, juiceless, or unpalatable." His was the roguish face with smiles hidden behind a solemn masquerade,

"While his eyes were wet as dry
Reading novels on the sly."

He was the oracle enshrined in the affections of the children, the sponsor for good in everything, who kindled the smiles of youth—and the smile of a poet; the hale old heart that brimmed and overran

"With the strange enchanted sights,
And the splendors and delights
Of the old *Arabian Nights*."

He was the cobbler of *lasting* fame, who "seeketh soles to save," the jovial shoemaker who was hailed—

“For all his goodly deeds—
Yea, bless him free for booting *thee*—
The first of all thy needs.”

“In a little side-show of existence,” said Riley at a banquet, “Tom Snow was the old man who was always worth the full price of admission.” He had been a member of London literary clubs and had, for those days, a vast knowledge of English authors. He was a superior reader, having been employed for thirteen years to read to “a flock of English shoemakers,” his chief duty being to explain the text while books were discussed. His experience on coming to America was similar to that of Martin Chuzzlewitt. He was the unfortunate owner of a spongy tract of swamp-land near Greenfield. “Standing in the middle of it,” said Riley, “he could wobble and shake the whole farm, and I was always glad that he could; nature never made him for an existence of trials and privations like that.” Finding that nothing but calamus would grow on the land, the Englishman opened a shoe-shop in Greenfield and later established himself in a bookstore, gathering under his roof the driftwood of the Township Library, which had been first secured through his efforts.

Rain or shine, hot or cold, the Shoe-Shop was headquarters for all sorts and conditions of village life, particularly for young fellows inclined to reading. The discussion of books continued as in London. Sometimes the lads came together to loaf and chatter over scraps of town fiction or history; at other times for games. It was not unusual to see the Argonaut humped up with an antagonist in the corner over a checkerboard, marching his platoon of wooden warriors to and fro, and at intervals crooning the silence with a “little wind-through-the-keyhole-whistle, while

looking for a place where he could swap one man for two."

The youthful Riley's affection for his old English guide and instructor deserves to become as proverbial as the love of Telemachus for the faithful Mentor. Tom Snow was the children's Peter Pindar,—and in those days boys and girls were children till they were twenty. Hogarth would have been charmed at the sight of the modern Mentor telling the Riley boy the story of Gog and Magog, the last two of a race of giants who were brought to London and chained to the king's palace, how the king made them serve as porters, how their effigies stood in front of Guildhall, and how when the clock on St. Paul's struck twelve they descended from their pedestals to go into the Hall for dinner, and how they were destroyed in the Great Fire. "That story," said Riley, "embellished by his quaint variations, gave the Old Man a parquet seat in my affections." And the Shoe-Shop, too, was enshrined in his love. That was a rare picture of the dear Long Ago, when the Old Man read the story of Little Nell, when he

. . . "arose and from his pack's scant treasure
A hoarded volume drew,
And games were dropped from hands of listless leisure
To hear the tale anew."

The Greenfield Socrates was a lover of old saws, but the foe of all he thought untrue. "Good beginning, bad ending: Boys," he exclaimed, accenting the remark with his hammer, "it is false. A good beginning is half the battle! Better yet—good beginning, good ending. Now in reading begin right—read Dickens." He had brought from London a full set of his favorite author, and the Argonaut, having arrived at the *reading* age of discretion, was introduced to the "greatest

novelist of the world." He immediately began to satisfy his hunger for *life as it is*. He had not gone far before he met the beloved Tiny Tim with his cheery "God bless us every one." He was soon aware that Dickens knew every street and alley in London, and that his novels cover every phase of Anglo-Saxon life. "He is the showman of literature," Riley remarked, when older; "he draws the curtain and there are the performers." Thus was the youth lured among thieves; thus he heard the cries of the mob. On he went past Toby Veck and Master Humphrey's Clock, down with the author into the most degraded corners of the Metropolis, among the vilest creatures, through "the dirtiest and darkest streets of the world."

"Hold!" cried the Old Man, "you are reading too fast. Take this," handing him *Old Curiosity Shop*; "memorize this," referring to the death of Little Nell. "'When I die, put me near something that has loved the light and had the sky above it always,'—where do you find anything in books so full of feeling as that? Master that and I will teach you to recite it."

Without knowing it the Shoemaker was extending a hand to an American audience a hundred thousand strong. The youth to whom he spoke was to rise to a shining summit on the platform. He was to rival Dickens' public readings in their palmiest days. The Shoemaker had been an actor in London; he knew the rostrum requirements, knew when an author was a failure in reading from his own works. One of his dreams was to take the youthful Riley to hear Dickens on the last American tour, and one readily imagines the disappointment in the Shoe-Shop when the author came no farther west than Buffalo. "We will hear Dickens," repeated the Shoemaker, "we will hear him

if we have to walk to the Academy of Music through a snowstorm."

For several years after the Shoemaker moved to Greenfield, the space round his shop was used as a hitching ground for country teams. As a meeting-place it rivaled the space round the Court House. There from cabins and clearings gathered a company of pioneers to hear the news of the week—unselfish and sometimes eccentric types of Hoosier life and character. It was a fallow feeding ground for a hungry youth, affording an opportunity for education seldom equaled in the annals of frontier life. There were the "Riley Folks,"

"The hale, hard-working people—
The kindly country people—
That Uncle used to know";

the Loehrs and the Hammonds, Tubb Kingry and Tugg Martin, the Griggsby family, the Local Politician, Old John Henry, and Squire Leachman, "as honest a farmer as ever drew the breath of life,"—these and a score of others who were later enshrined in the poet's verse—upright, reliable freeholders, or men and women striving to be such. That there were exceptions to uprightness goes without argument—on off days, and rally days, for instance, when the Hominy Ridge Clan appeared "with plumes and banners gay." Once when the old town happened to have its face turned the other way, and the barefoot fellows were feeling the worse for their wild oats, they rode their prancing steeds up and down the sidewalks, the chief of the Clan riding savagely through the front door into a hardware store—thereby supplying the community

with excitement for a week, and affording loafers an opportunity to witness a fine exhibition of English wrath when the Clan rode past the Shoemaker's door.

The Shoemaker deserves our thanks for directing Riley to the best literature. When he introduced the lad to *Oliver Twist*, he conferred a favor on posterity. What he did added to the happiness of innumerable future homes. It meant cheer for the heart-breaking, smiles and laughter for firesides in generations to come.

"Creeping on where Time has been,
A rare old plant is the Ivy green"—

thus the gray haired Mentor repeated the couplet, gently, "trippingly on the tongue" as the London players did—little dreaming that fame would cling to him and his Shoe-Shop as the ivy to ruins—little dreaming that the Riley youth in the dear afterwhiles would voice in "The Enduring," a poem that would add charm to life wherever the English tongue is spoken. For Mentor and pupil it is a loving illustration of what Dickens had told them that nothing beautiful and good sees death or is forgotten.

Riley began to read Dickens before he quit school—indeed, he neglected the schoolroom for a course in literature at the Shoe-Shop. The influence of the novels upon him at that impressionable age is incomputable. He appropriated their language and used it till it seemed his own. He was so fascinated with the stories that as he grew to maturity, their humor and pathos became part and parcel of his character and conversation.

From the Shoe-Shop forward, reading became a re-

quirement so essential that Riley seldom left home without an old satchel and a half dozen books—"my reticule," he phrased it, when a bird of passage.

While visiting once in a neighboring town he found a broken-backed copy of *The Task*, which held him within its grasp for the whole of an April day. It contrasted the charms of rural life with the novelty and allurements of the town. He learned that Nature deceives no student and that wisdom is to be won by slow solicitation. He was warned of the fatal habit of swallowing what he read without pause or meditation. As he lay there, face downward, on the bare floor of a scantily furnished room, he was fully persuaded that he was not "the victim of luxurious ease." "I was poor," he said, "not a poor vagrant but a poor bird of passage who was rich without knowing it, poor as the truant Cowper was poor, rambling on the banks of the Thames, subsisting on scarlet-hips and blushing crabs."

It may seem to some a trifling affection for a genius who grew by feeding on Irving, Dickens, Harte, and Cowper to care deeply for a series of school readers. But so Riley did. No other series of books, in his opinion, had so affected the morals and the happiness of children. He appreciated to the utmost the sentiment Frances Willard expressed when she offered a hundred dollars for a set of the first edition. "The compiler," he remarked, "was a genius, and deserves a monument from the generation he so signally nourished and elevated." His favorite of the series was the *Fifth Reader*, a book many old boys and girls will remember, compiled by Professor William H. McGuffey of Miami University. Riley loved the book chiefly for its poems. "I liked to memorize them," he remarked when fifty years old. "If I had the *Reader*

now you would find the pages of poetry turned down at the corners, the verses underlined, and the margins decorated with sketches—craggs, cliffs, landscapes and faces.” In his latter days it was once permitted him to see an old copy of the second edition. He gazed upon the homely treasures of its pages with feelings that were tenderly retrospective, “feelings that resembled sorrow,” he said, “as mist resembles rain.”

The compiler of the *Readers* had chosen his selections from the best in all English literature. It had been his object, as the preface stated, to present “the best specimens of style and especially to exert a decided and healthy moral and religious influence.” The child or the savage orator, McGuffey observed, never makes a mistake in inflection, or emphasis, or modulation. The best speakers and readers were those who followed the impulse of nature as felt in their own hearts.

Perhaps after all Professor McGuffey did have a monument in the wide, unrivaled influence Riley exerted on the platform. The poet never looked for help to schools of elocution. He followed “the impulse of nature in his own heart,” as the old books directed.

Every reader, as Longfellow remarked, has his first book, that is, one book among all others that fascinates his imagination and satisfies the desires of his mind. Riley had such a book. Other books were near and dear to him, the “British Books,” the *Fifth Reader*, *Oliver Twist*, *Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Arabian Nights*—so that about the Shoe-Shop and Court House he was known as “the lad of nine books,” probably in response to the tradition that Lincoln was “the lad of seven books.” But none of these twined their pages about his heartstrings as did *Longfellow’s Poems*. It

was a current saying in Greenfield that Riley knew *The Spanish Student* by heart. The charm of the poems was never broken. He read them with abiding affection. They were among the books carried from place to place in his "reticule." For thirty years the Cambridge Edition of Longfellow was his traveling companion. The first thing to do on entering a room at a hotel was to lay the book on the table. It was his mascot. He did not always read it, but the heavenly monitor was always in sight. Whenever he opened it, like Longfellow opening *The Sketch Book*, he also opened "the mysterious door which led back into the haunted chambers of youth."

"Longfellow is my poetry Bible," he said. "To read him is a liberal education. The beauty of his character transcends everything else. Outside of the excellence of his poems, his is the sweetest human mind that ever existed."

The Argonaut was now registered among the lovers of good books. He had made a fine start although he was not yet beyond the luring sway of sidetracks and byways. The Golden Fleece was not in sight, but now and again he caught a glimpse of shining summits ahead. Guideposts were up and the long distance ones were pointing vaguely through the mist to a delectable goal.

"Behind the curtain's mystic fold
The glowing future lay unrolled."

CHAPTER V

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

THE tale of the Argonaut now runs to the romantic, up hill and down dale with a vender of "Standard Remedies," Doctor S. B. McCrillus of Anderson, Indiana, the county-seat of a neighboring county, and the reader is invited to think happily of a holiday spirit that was tolerant of mirth and amusement.

Doctor McCrillus was not a stranger to Greenfield. He was cordially interested in Captain Riley, and it is due him and the eloquent Captain to digress a moment from the regular narrative.

"Neighbor Derby, shake hands with 'Whit' Riley, son of Reuben Riley, the Greenfield attorney," said the Doctor to a farmer one day, while touring the country. The farmer manifesting ignorance of the attorney, the Doctor's voice instantly rose to the pitch of fervor. "Don't you know Reuben Riley, Captain Reuben A. Riley? He is the most eloquent man in the state."

This was not said in jest. The Doctor had listened to a few celebrated pioneer preachers. He had on several occasions heard Morton, Indiana's "War Governor," Richard Thompson, Dan Vorhees, and other political torch-lights of his time; but "not one of them," said he, "can hold a candle to the eloquence of Captain Riley. I repeat it: Reuben Riley is the most eloquent orator in the state." This may have been an exaggeration, but it was not one to the Doctor. There were a

score of old patriots in Greenfield who said the same. As eminent an authority as Horace Greeley, who had heard the fluent Captain in the Fremont campaign, held a similar view. The Doctor had a theory that the greatest speeches go unrecorded. "They are traditions," said he, "and several Riley speeches belong to that class." He had heard the Captain at a memorial meeting a few days after Lincoln's assassination. He recalled the indefinable poise of the orator, the flash of his dark eye, and the magical effect of his gestures. The eulogy so impressed him that after the lapse of half a lifetime he could recall the solemn images of the occasion as they appeared "in their morning luster." Old residents of Greenfield refer to it as the "Lost Speech." The Doctor remembered that the eulogist prefaced the speech with two texts, one from Cowper and the other from the Bible; the first—

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm":

and the second, "I will make judgment the line, and righteousness the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies and the waters shall overflow the hiding place." "When Captain Riley spoke," added the Doctor, "you knew God moves in a mysterious way. You could see Him in the tempest, in the flames of devouring fire; you could hear Him in the earthquake."

One brief paragraph of the speech remains; the remainder was the gift of inspiration under the spell of the occasion. "Never," the orator wrote on an envelope a moment before rising to speak, "never in the history

of recorded time has the transition from free, exultant, forgiving, universal joy, been so quick, so sudden, to universal gloom and sorrow. We rejoice with joy unspeakable at the realized salvation of our government. We are stricken with horror dumb, with dark forebodings, almost with despair, at this blackest crime against the nation—against humanity—the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.”

After he had finished, the orator sat down in the silence and wept with the crowd. He had opened the fountains of universal sorrow. A comrade in tears reminded him of a battle-torn flag returned from the war, which was to share the honors of the day. Promptly rising to the occasion, he paid a tribute to the Stars and Stripes that brought the audience to its feet with enthusiasm as uncontrollable as the silence that followed the tribute to the dead President was profound and sorrowful.

Since the poet’s grandmother Riley held the people captive in camp-meetings, and since his father was the peer of the most eloquent men in Indiana, it would seem that Doctor McCrillus had ground for attributing the poet’s success on the platform to heredity. “The poet was a descendant of speech-makers,” said the Doctor. “Never a pose before the footlights, never a gesture or smile that could not be traced back to the eloquence of his father.”

The Doctor was a man of warm sympathies but inclined at times to eccentricity. His long, white “breezy whiskers” were a part of the landscape. As Mrs. Spottletoe would say, they were the lode-star of his existence. “On a clear day,” said Riley, “you could see them from Hardscrabble to Point Isabel.” Although widely known for his quaint ways and

"old-school oddities," he was not an average drug pedler by any means. Nor did he make average claims for his "Standard Remedies." He allowed the great public to be the judge. "His marvelous brews and concoctions," said Riley, "relieved every form of distress from

The pinch of tight shoes
To a dose of the *blues*."

Riley started out with the Doctor on the "Standard Remedy" excursions in the summer of 1872 and continued with him irregularly for two years. On the road into Greenfield the Doctor had seen some fine examples of sign-painting on the Fair Ground fence, advertising the Farmer's Grocery and other merchants of the town. While he and a young traveling recruit whom he had already enlisted were standing by their wagon near the Court House, they "were approached," said the Doctor, "by a verdant looking young fellow dressed in overalls, who was hunting work. I noticed the overalls for my other sign-painter wore loud clothes."

"Do you need a sign-painter?" he asked.

"I have one," replied the Doctor; "there he is; shake hands with James McClanahan."

But the man in overalls was in earnest. He hoped that the outside world would yield him favors his native town denied.

"Have you seen any of my work?" he continued. The Doctor had not seen it.

"How did you come in?"

"By the Fair Ground."

"Did you see some large signs there on the fence?"

"Yes," answered the Doctor.

"I made them," said Riley.

The Doctor now being interested assured him he had never seen work in that line so skilfully done, and inquired his name.

"James Riley," was the reply, "Jim Riley, they call me round town."

"Any relation to Reuben Riley?"

"My father," answered James.

That he might consider young Riley's proposal a few moments longer, the Doctor turned aside to deliver some "Remedies" to the drug stores while the two sign-painters began a friendship that was never broken. Riley took his new friend to see other samples of his work, among them the large advertising card in the post-office. Before returning to the wagon the Doctor went to the law office of the elder Riley, with whom he talked a few minutes on current issues, not neglecting to compliment the attorney on the "Lost Speech" and other efforts of like nature.

"Your son James wants to travel with me," he remarked as he rose to go.

"My God!" cried the father, not bitterly but sorrowfully; "if you can make anything out of him take him along."

For two years or more the father had been in doubt about his son's ability to make a living. The Doctor ventured the opinion that the son had merit. "There *must* be *something* to him," he said; "you forget; he is the son of Reuben Riley."

This compliment pleased the father greatly, so they quickly agreed that since the son was of age he should be the architect of his own fortune. The compact the Doctor made for the son's service was, in part, word for word, Mrs. Jarley's agreement when she em-

ployed Little Nell to point out her wax-work figures to the spectators. And it was "open air wagrancy," too, although occasionally the Doctor did exhibit his wares in town halls, taverns and vacant store-rooms. As to salary (readers of Dickens will remember), Mrs. Jarley could pledge herself to no specific sum until she had sufficiently tested Nell's abilities and watched her in the performance of her duties. But board and lodging she bound herself to provide, and she furthermore "passed her word" that the board should always be good in quality, and in quantity plentiful. Precisely such an agreement the doctor made for the services of young Riley. He promised fried chicken at farm-houses whenever the "Remedy" show was in the neighborhood of dinner bells.

"You are going with us, James," said the Doctor as he approached the wagon; "we have a few deliveries to make; be ready when we return—have your Sunday clothes packed."

"I haven't an extra coat to my back," was the gay reply. What did Riley care about a change of clothes in June, when he was building a bridge into Wonderland?

So, a few days later, the three birds of passage climbed to their high seats on the wagon and drove away north on the Pendleton road, behind a glossy span of sorrel horses that "in their perfect beauty and symmetry, high heads and tossing manes," as Riley characterized them years afterward, "looked as though they were just prancing out of an Arabian dream."

"Instantly," said Riley, recalling the wayfaring days, "I started on my voyage for the Golden Fleece. It was delightful to bowl over the country. My blood ran through me like a gulf-stream. I laughed all the time.

Miles and miles of somber landscapes were made bright with merry song and when the sun shone and all the golden summer lay spread out before me, it was glorious. I drifted on through it like a wisp of thistle-down, careless of how, or when, or where the wind should anchor me."

He was twenty-two years old, but in habit and appearance several years younger—an original young man, full of fire and faith but devoid of the experience which comes from traveling. His neighbors did not take him for a poet, although he looked out of large, thoughtful eyes. He was compactly built, had a full face and fair complexion, reminding one of a wayward college boy whose mind was on pranks instead of books. He was generous to a fault and modest as a girl of fifteen.

At Anderson there was a halt of three weeks to make preparations for a lengthy excursion. The Doctor had previously vended his "Remedies" only in neighboring counties. Now that he had another sign-painter, and, as was soon discovered, a minstrel and theatrical performer as well, he would carry his message to remote districts. Anderson was to be the hub of his travels, and, as it turned out, for a few years the rival of Greenfield in claiming the residence of the poet.

Impressions of Riley's new home on White River very naturally crept into his letters. "Anderson," he wrote a year or so later, "is a very handsome little town of about five thousand inhabitants—good people, speaking generally, although of course it takes all kinds of people and so forth. Vice is not as rampant here as in days of old. It grows weaker every day, and religion and law, hand in hand, are fast driving it from the land. If the city has one blight, it is its Court House. That really

looks out of place and uncomfortable, surrounded as it is by beautiful business blocks; and I sometimes think it is a pity it could not attend the Old Settlers' meeting, for it could go farther back than the oldest inhabitant and tell of the youthful prowess of Indiana, especially of the Indian chief, Anderson, for whom the town was named. One can almost hear the old-time war whoop echoes lurking around in its misty, time-dimmed architecture."

Soon after his arrival in the town, Riley designed a special trade-mark for the "Popular Standard Remedies," a work which required three days of experiment and ingenuity. "Your Oriental Liniment," said he to the Doctor, "is advertised 'best on earth,' and your patrons must be protected against fraud and imposition. Your circular says 'good for sprains and bruises.' Add 'bee stings.' " The apiarian disorder was accordingly listed and there resulted an increase in business.

Riley also won local recognition by painting a huge sign on the Court House fence. Chief interest however centered in a "hummer"—in rhyme—painted at the corner of Meridian and Bolivar Streets, which drew from the *Weekly Herald* the opinion that the "Painter Poet" had immortalized a popular jeweler of the town. School children repeated it trippingly:

"We would advise you all to see
The sparkling Gems and Jewelry
At John Awalt's and be content
To know your money's wisely spent
At his immense establishment."

The preparation for the "Standard Remedy" wanderings included a long spring wagon made in Ohio, from which fact it received its name, the "Buckeye." The

wagon was equipped with buffalo robes for cool days, and three big boxes covered with leather for protection from rain—one box under a high seat in front and two larger ones back of it with a small box and seat-pad on top,

“Where the sign-painters sat
To giggle and chat—
With their feet high and dry,
And their heads in the sky.”

For that day it was an imposing spectacle with the Doctor's “breezy whiskers” and the merry pair of painters back of him, their hats on one side, spinning down “the grooves of time,” behind a span of horses sniffing the wind. Those fiery steeds possessed the virtues of Bucephalus. They were as fleet as any

“That ever cantered wild and free
Across the plains of Araby.”

Sometimes the “Buckeye” carried a thousand dollars' worth of “Remedies.” Usually a trip consumed two weeks and frequently covered a distance of two hundred miles. One of the first midsummer excursions led out by way of Middletown, Hagerstown and Cambridge City, on down to the White River Valley, reputed by Riley, and artists after him, to be “the most beautiful spot on God's earth.” Another excursion led to the northwest, through Alexandria, Elwood and Kokomo, to “the banks of Deer Creek.” When sales were numerous the Doctor traveled but a few miles a day. Driving into a town he would leave two or three dozen bottles at the drug store and soon thereafter, half a mile out, a new sign appeared: “Go to Manafee's for

McCrillus Popular Remedies." He also sold to farmers while the sign-painters nailed sign-boards to trees and gate-posts. The company, preferring the farmer's hospitable board to the hotels, often remained over night in the country. Fried chicken was the rule on crisp autumn days, if the poet and his chum could find one roosting on the manger when they went out with the farmer early in the morning to feed the stock.

Cool spring water was also the rule. Sweeter draughts were never quaffed than those which flowed from the mossy brim of the oaken buckets chained to the "well-sweeps" of that time. The presence of giggling country girls always afforded merriment. The rural pictures were never wanting in interest if the travelers could stay their winding pilgrimage,

"Then go their way, remembering still
The wayside well beneath the hill."

An excursion westward led as far away as the river counties of the Wabash. One day the Doctor became reminiscent. Something reminded him of a rich bachelor he knew, who went to Illinois to buy land of a widow, who, the bachelor discovered on reaching her door, was the girl he had loved when she lived with his mother on a farm in Ohio. Thus the Argonaut found the *thread of gold* for a ballad, "Farmer Whipple—Bachelor," which soon saw the light in the "Original Poetry" column of the *Greenfield News*.

Riley did not travel down the river as far as Old Vincennes, but far enough for his fancy, a few years later, in the guise and dialect of a pedler, to canvass the counties for a patent churn. This lively picture from his poem, "Regardin' Terry Hut," is mainly personal experience:

"I've travelled round the grand old State
 Of Indiany, lots, o' late!—
 I've canvassed Crawferdsville and sweat
 Around the town o' Lafayette;
 I've saw a many a County-seat
 I *ust* to think was hard to beat:
 At constant dreelage and expense
 I've worked Greencastle and Vincennes—
 Drapped out of Putnam into Clay,
 Owen, and on down thataway
 Plum into Knox, on the back-track
 Fer home ag'in—and glad I'm back!—
 I've saw these towns, as I say—but
 They's none 'at beats old Terry Hut!"

It is interesting to note the poet's play of fancy around the "old churn." It appeared in one of his first poems to receive eastern recognition, then entitled, "A Destiny," in which a farmer chased a scrap of paper over the fence and across the field, and capturing it, scratched his head and pondered over a rhyme and the pencil-sketch of a dairy maid under it, and then with the complacency of ignorance saw through the whole business of *dreaming* and *poetry*:

"I see the p'int to the whole concern—
 He's studied out a patent churn!"

Strictly speaking the *churn* was a *sieve* patented by a "country poet" of Hancock County, the "corduroy poet," Riley sometimes called him, and at other times, Professor Startailer or the "seersucker poet." The patentee, all aflame with the prospect of a fortune, sold territory for the sale of the sieve, to his *friends*. "He let us in on velvet," said Riley; "a *friend* and I bought two border counties near Ft. Wayne. I still have Adams County," he laughingly averred forty years after.

In the preface to his first book, Riley pleasantly recalled the "country poet," but he did not pleasantly remember the inventor of the sieve. A few years after buying Adams County, he got his revenge by using the inventor's name as a *nom de plume* in a weekly paper.

After the lengthy excursion on the Wabash, the medical troupe made a short one nearer home. The sign-painters ingeniously manifested the "holiday spirit" one evening at Cadiz, a small town in Henry County. Breezes blew from the Blue River hills, wood fires flamed on the edge of the forest, lamps shone dimly from the street corners and tin lanterns hung in the trees. The village that midsummer night was as bewitching to Riley as Cadiz, the city of beauty and love in sunny Spain, was to Longfellow. If the daughters of Spain were matchless in grace and figure, so were the bright-eyed maidens of the Hoosier hamlet fair and charming. The little town, surrounded by dense woodlands, was to Riley the Dreamland of the frontier. He was in the mood to enjoy it; so were the villagers. They were as gleeful as the peasants and cavaliers of Longfellow's Spain.

The medical troupe revived happy memories. The Doctor had been in Cadiz the previous summer. "I have now returned," said he, "with a menagerie" (referring to his two sign-painters). "They are *showmen* from the circus—just canvassing temporarily for European Balsam." The "menagerie" summoned a youthful company from every nook and alley. Plowboys and country lassies came from the farms. They were "light of heart and heel," and responded merrily to the music of the French harp and guitar. A side-show was improvised in the middle of the street. Riley strapped an empty soap box to his shoulders, turned a crank in

imitation of an organ-grinder and played the French harp while his chum called attention to the Wild Girl from the Congo (a local merry-maker), who, in torn garments and long-disheveled hair, at the opportune moment, rose like a phantom from the deep box on the wagon. She was the Savage Wonder, and volubly did the showmen describe her strange ancestry and the African jungles where she had been captured.

A novel feature of the evening came when Riley wrapped his traveling chum in the buffalo robes and led him on all fours around the wagon and then told the story of a "Little Boy who went out into the woods to shoot a bear." The alarming "Woo-oah," the great big sycamore tree, the four broken legs when the boy chopped off the limb and the bear fell "clean to the ground"—all were there, soon to be elaborated into the famous "Bear Story," which in due time became a favorite number in the poet's public readings, and the delight of children who read the "Child-World" a generation later. The little crowd chuckled at the mention of "sycamore tree." Every lad present knew it was all but impossible for boy or bear to climb one—a fact which many older heads in the poet's audience of a later period did not know. The bear could climb an oak or poplar, but not a sycamore tree—and that was the "nub" to the story, which made the innocent ignorance of the "Little Boy" charming and true to life.

Up to this point the performance had been crude—but about ten o'clock the voice of the tenor rose to the realms of art and the joy of the audience to the plane of rapture. Friends brought Riley a guitar, borrowed for the occasion. At last the hour had come for the instrument to respond to the touch of a master.

Such harmony the Blue River hills had never known. "That fellow," said a barber, whose shop was near, "will have to stop playing or I'll have to stop shaving." None there had heard minstrelsy half so sweet. It was clear to them that night, as it was always clear to the performer, that when a master "tangles his fingers in the strings of a guitar there is an indefinable something in its tone that is not all of earth."

One week in autumn the medical troupe found itself far away on the St. Mary's River, near the Ohio state line. "We are going home to-day, boys," said the Doctor. It was eighty miles, but there was something in the speed of the sorrels that said they could make it. Sales had been unusually good, and the Doctor had by trading filled his boxes with dry goods, groceries and hardware.

On that notable trip, Riley was a veritable Tom Pinch seeking his fortune. Unlike Tom on the London coach, he did not pass "places famous in history and fable"; but he witnessed new scenes. He made discoveries. He was a spectator of nature and of men's fortunes and how they played their parts. He saw things "as from a common theater." That joyous ride was for years the theme of his narrative. Although his "bump of locality" was as inefficient then as it was afterward, he *saw* things and remembered what he saw. John Hay was wont to say that his vision and the vividness and accuracy of his memory were the secrets of his success. If it were a question of *vision* (omitting the element of place) he could trace back the eighty-mile run link by link. His indefinite purpose added zest to it. "I was driven by the uncertain currents of existence," he said, "yet the novelty and uncertainty of it were positively ecstatic." Like Walter Scott, he was makin' him-

self a' the time but did na ken maybe what he was about till years had passed.

They left the river at a place called The Devil's Race Ground. The morning was crisp and bright, and the sorrels were homeward bound. The Doctor held the lines—"eighty breezy miles were written in his very whiskers." The sign-painters were at the top-notch of being. As they sped onward the poet's heart "ran riot with the Muse," and his chum accented the pleasure at every turn in the road. They were two merry boys

"Full of fancy—full of folly—
Full of jollity and fun,
Like the South Wind and the Sun."

There was enough medley in the day (in the words of Pope) to "make their souls dance upon a jig to heaven." On they went, voyaging with the thistle-down, south by west, a swift Lake Erie wind at their backs, their cheeks flushed like winter apples, sailing away under fleecy clouds,—past hedges—past country wagons — past sinewy woodsmen — past rosy-cheeked schoolboys — rumbling over culverts — over gurgling streams—over the "underground railroad"—past ducks and geese and the peacock on the sunny side of the barnyard—down a steep incline across the Wabash at Buena Vista—round the Loblolly Swampland—round Sugar Island—past prehistoric mounds—past morning-glory vines climbing over cabin homes—past the dimpled cheeks of babyhood—past dog-fennel beds, gravel beds and through spice-brush ravines on to Pennville. There they cooled the horses' hoofs in the Salamonie, and there the poet saw

"The hills slope as soft as the dawn down to noon
While the river ran by like an old fiddle-tune."

Out of town again. Mark Twain, traveling in the stage-coach across the plains to see strange lands and wonderful people, was not more animated. Onward bowled the "Buckeye" past the haymakers, the new-mown clover and the long windrows reaching like motionless waves from end to end of the field—under the gnarled willow tree where barefooted children fought and clung to the swing, "waitin' fer the cat to die"—past the *raising bee* and the log barn springing up "at the wagging of the fiddlestick"—past stake-and-rider fences—past log huts and their stick-chimneys—from Pennville to the Panhandle Route, where the poet saw the "iron horse tugging away at a row of freight cars long as Paradise Lost"—then down the line a mile to Red Key to joke with the operator while a farmer thrashed the baggage-smasher—across the track for refreshments with the restaurant man whose luscious viands had been the talk of the town; where (in Riley rhyme)

"Strawberries blushed with a rosy gleam
On islands of sugar in oceans of cream;
And the lips of the maiden were tinged with a glow
The kiss of a lover could never bestow."

Then a *détour* of the Pioneer Fair, where Riley caught a glimpse of Grandfather Squeers and the old settlers about him, like the trees, repeating their rustic legends to one another. But the crying babies and Elviry at the organ awkwardly feeling her way up and down the keys for the "Vacant Chair" and the "Old Camp Ground" were more than his sense of melody could stand. The sorrels, too, were restless. It was two o'clock and they had not reached their half-way point. Westward-ho down the road again by the race-track to see the "side-wheelers" pace neck and neck



THE MOTHER'S GIRLHOOD HOME ON THE MISSISSINEWA



STANDARD REMEDY TRADE-MARK
Designed by Riley

"twixt the flag and the wire"—now gazing on the purple haze that hung over the valley where the river flowed—now skirting sunny glens where the bees droned their honey-song in the golden-roads—threading the winding seclusion of the river road—fording the creek near the rustic bridge of Wonderland—alighting a moment at the Indian spring for a draught

"From the old-fashioned gourd that was sweeter, by odds,

Than the goblets of gold at the lips of the gods!"

On down the old Muncie Trail through the sumac thickets with visions of superstitions, powwows, and Red Men smoking the fragrant kinnik-kinnik—through the grapevine wilderness known to the oldest inhabitant as the feeding ground of passenger pigeons that then as in the days of Audubon "glided aloft in flocks and spirally descended to sweep like the wind among the trees"—on through enchanted aisles

"Adown deep glades where the forest shades
Were dim as the dusk of day
On the Mississinewa."

Magical name for Riley! Long had he cherished it in memory as the girlhood home of his mother.

The dawn of recollection for him dated from a memory of his mother's dewy blue eyes when he stood by her chair near their log-cottage fire while she told him the stories of the long ago on the Mississinewa. Tenderly he alluded to it afterward in his poem, "Envoy":

"Then the face of a Mother looks back, through the mist

Of the tears that are welling; and, lucent with light,
I see the dear smile of the lips I have kissed

As she knelt by my cradle at morning and night."

There are periods in the life of every poet when the enjoyment of a week is narrowed down to the ecstasy of an hour. Such an interlude was Riley's while threading the wonderland of the Mississinewa. From that hour until midnight his heart was athrill at the ease with which his ideas found birth and expression. The trees were harps of melody. The very fence panels flowed along the wayside in poetic meter. On he went

"Down the current of his dreams, gliding away
To the dim harbor of another day,"

the jingle of his rhymes keeping time with the jingle of the bridles—past the wake of the hurricane where "the voice of the Lord had broken the cedars"—through the mellow gloom—through the smoke where the woodpeckers hammered the dead limbs in the clearing—past cow-bells clinking sweeter tunes than "Money Musk"—past squadrons of wild turkeys gobbling in the woods—past red and yellow tomatoes on the garden fence—past the campaign grove where the candidate squandered his spread-eagle rhetoric—past the Greeley flagpole with its streamer flying to defeat—past bushwhackers—past the circuit rider on his way from the basket meeting—down the Bee Line racing with the "cow-catcher" on the Accommodation Train—past the cider mill and apple tree, the country frolic which drew obliging families together when the fruit was to be harvested—past the Orchard Lands of Long Ago,

"Catching the apples' faint perfume
And mingling with it, fragrant hints of pear
And musky melon ripening somewhere."

"And then the ride," said Riley, "into the saintly twilight, toward the clouds in the west that hid the silver sickle of the moon with their dusky locks. How inex-

pressibly divine was the drapery of the night that descended upon us." There were sparks from the horses' hoofs as they accelerated their speed. There were mammoth castles and battlements across the fields, for so the woodland shadows seemed. Then came the sudden shower that silenced the katydids, and then the ride through the thunder and the rain—

"And still the way was wondrous with the flash of hill
and plain—
The stars like printed asterisks—the moon a murky
stain."

Eighty breezy miles—one hour as the aeroplane flies, but sixteen for the "dazzling speed" of the sorrels.

An early poem dates back to this eighty-mile run. The sorrels and a little *thread of gold* from the "Engineer" (a short story by Mary Hartwell in the *Household Magazine*) prompted the "Iron Horse," the poem which subsequently drew a note of praise from Longfellow. "The engineer and his *iron horse* and his row of baggage cars and passenger coaches rushed across the land"—so ran the hint in the magazine. Driving through the country the poet bantered the Doctor about his sorrels, challenging him to rival the *flaming* steed. "You can stir up the dust," said he, "and shoot the rapids at the toll-gates, but the path of *my* steed

Spins out behind him like a thread
Unravelled from the reel of time."

The trip to St. Mary's River furnished suggestions for other poems, not that Riley then wrote them, but the incidents were tucked away in memory for future use. One more is interesting for its novelty. When the Doctor was detained a day or more in a town, the

sign-painters usually became acquainted with the young folks, particularly if they were musically inclined. Thus Riley seldom went to the next town without leaving behind him a merry circle to praise his music on the guitar. "One evening at Decatur," said his chum, "Riley was foraging about from place to place when his hungry eyes fell upon a picture that lingered in memory years after other events of the evening had faded. Strange how a little piece of trimming like that will cling to a fellow. The old town was making a big fuss over its first railroad, and there was something going on every night. There were music and dancing. We played games and told fortunes. Among the visiting friends we saw at a party, was a gay looking girl who wore a Gainsborough hat. 'See that slender figure there,' said Riley, 'with a hat tilted up like a butterfly's wing?' She looked beautiful with a little knot of roses in her hair." When the sign-painters learned she was from the Queen City, they understood why her dress answered the requirements of fashion. "She was not a Duchess of Devonshire," said Riley, long years afterward, "but I do remember her hat, and I remember too, when we met her again the next day that the sunny locks on her temples looked like a Golden Fleece." Thus the poet received the suggestion for his poem, "The Discouraging Model."

One of the many things Riley declined to do was to revisit the Mississinewa. After lumbermen had destroyed its primeval simplicity, his interest in the locality vanished. For him it remained the wonderland of youth. He clung with loving tenacity to the simple beauty and pathos of days that were no more. Alma Gluck never sang of them more sweetly than he remembered them:

“Tell me the tales that to me were so dear
 Long, long ago—long, long ago;
 Sing me the songs I delighted to hear,
 Long, long ago—*L-o-n-g A-g-o.*”

Should it be a matter of surprise that this disciple of *The Days Gone By*, this poet who saw good in everything, should write of things as he did? Considering the wealth of his experience and his depth of insight the marvel is, *not* that he found so many jewels in obscurity, so many diamonds in the dust, but that he did not find more. Before he could write about things he had to live them. In Whitman phrase, he had to absorb his country affectionately before the people would absorb him. To him his native state was the fairest picture in Columbia's gallery. He saw

“Within the forest gloom
 His Indiana burst in bloom—
 A broad expanse of fair and fertile land,
 Like some rich landscape from the master's hand.”

He saw the polar frost on the “punkin” and the clover; he was driven against the blinding flakes of the snow-storm. Like the birds he dined out-of-doors. He ranged untraveled fields. Once more, nature—

“Choosing sweet clay from the breast
 Of the unexhausted West”—

was making a man by breaking away from worn-out plans. She was not shaping a President, not a shepherd of mankind, but a *Poet* of mankind, a voice to *sing* of a President and his Silent Victors, a heart to lure lyrics and ballads from the great symphony that lay untouched around him.

A famous son of Harvard, Joseph H. Choate, is on record as saying that “Mark Twain learned more from

his post-graduate days as a river pilot on the Mississippi than he could have got from a course at Harvard"—Choate's interesting way of saying that there are other universities besides halls of learning. Facts such as these we are to remember as Riley bowls through the counties and towns of Indiana and western Ohio.

In the winter season the Doctor confined his "Remedy" sales to points nearer the Hub. Time was chiefly given to work in the office and laboratory. Most of the time the sign-painters had to shift for themselves, and a thriftless piece of shifting it was for the "Painter Poet." While board, lodging and expenses were paid by the Doctor, all went merrily enough. Paying his own expenses was different. The art of writing verse was a gift and he was never happier than when exercising it, but the art of making money was foreign to him. "This thing of making odds and ends meet," said he, "who but the devil can understand that." All of which accords with a bit of ancient philosophy, that we all are working together to one end, farmers, merchants and poets, some with knowledge and design, and others without knowing what they do.

As the weeks passed, the old story-and-a-half boarding house, corner Jackson and Bolivar Streets, at which Riley was at intervals to go in and out for the next five years, became a lively spot. When there was a dollar to pay the board bill, he was jovial. There was music on the guitar; the world was agog with merriment. When his purse was empty the bills were unpaid—tradition says some were never paid. He managed however to be always on good terms with the landlady. "Your board bill," she would remind him. "Yes, yes," he would smile, "I must pay that bill"—and thus gaily the delay went on to the end of another

week, the landlady as happy in waiting for her money as he was uncomfortable in his inability to pay it. He was always rhyming; at the dinner table there was "catapeller" for saltcellar, "pig-jowl" for sugar bowl, and so forth. According to the landlady, Mrs. H. E. Whitmore, he gave "a world of attention to dress—provided," she said, "some one would furnish the clothing. He did not wear glasses, but believe me, he wore a mustache, a long, jaunty one which he was always curling." The poor little waif of a mustache (according to its owner) was just two years old. He shuddered when he passed a barber shop lest by some strange ungovernable impulse he should be constrained to enter it and sacrifice the waif for the relief of his friends.

One snowy day he went into the kitchen with a "blacksnake" whip in his hand. (He had found it in the street.) "Woh!" he shouted, impersonating a farmer who had a load of wood to sell. "Woh, there! you bare-boned broadsides, didn't ye have no fodder fer breakfast? Madam," addressing the landlady, "I must sell some wood. My board bill is three weeks overdue; sell it I must or be sued for debt. What kind did you say? Well, mostly beech, sugar and elm—water-elm, Madam, will make a fire hot 'nough to roast bear. How old air you, little girl?" addressing a daughter. "W'y, child, not twelve? Like apples? No? Hickory nuts? There's a wagon load on my farm. Woh!" It took but a few moments for interest to rise to a fever pitch. The oven waxed hot and scorched the pie crust. Coffee bubbles ran over the brim and danced on the stove lid, while mother and daughter sank into their chairs in sheer exhaustion from laughter. Thus genius paid a board bill.

Other echoes came from the boarding house. Riley wrote and bound a book in the kitchen, a little book of tea leaves, to which he gave the title, "Nursery Rhymes for Children." His chum loaned it about until it was worn to a frazzle and the rhymes lost. Friends referred to it as his first book. An incident, more particularly for those interested in the poet's public readings, was the coming to the dining-room one week of an "educationalist," who had been engaged to do institute work for the Madison County teachers. He was abnormally affected and never lost an opportunity to dilate on his favorite topic—the *object lesson*. "Butter plates and teaspoons," said he primly, "are charming illustrations."

"A peanut, I suppose," said Riley across the table, "would detract from the dignity and profundity of the subject."

"Quite the contrary," was the return, "super-excellent, a very clever suggestion."

A few weeks after, Riley entertained a company of friends at a private house. Among his quaint selections was "The Object Lesson," by no means the unrivaled specimen of humor it was afterward, but the beginning.

January, 1873, found Riley in Grant County, attracting the attention of farmers, with signs on barnsides; one, a huge boot and shoe and a colossal figure 4 with a picture of a man by it, advertising the Foreman Company. There were at the roadsides, too, funny signs in rhyme for merry-makers, such as

Arnold & Gunder
For Dry Goods by Thunder.

That he was not financially successful was recorded

in the Doctor's daybook. He had not enough money to attend the theater. The Doctor bought the tickets for *Humpty Dumpty*. "The play," said he, "was a failure but Riley's comments on it were worth more than the price of admission." The Doctor had advanced money and merchandise for the sign-painting venture, and the result was somewhat discouraging, as seen in the following table:

J. W. Riley, Dr.

1873

Jan. 8.	To Cash (at Marion) -----	\$ 3.00
Jan. 18.	To Cash (for paint) -----	1.00
Jan. 24.	To Cash (for paint) -----	1.00
Jan. 24.	To white lead -----	1.00
Jan. 31.	To order on Baums -----	3.00
Jan. 31.	To Cash -----	1.00
Feb. 1.	To Cash -----	3.00
Feb. 10.	To Cash -----	.35
Feb. 14.	To Handkerchief -----	.40
Feb. 15.	To Cash -----	5.00
Feb. 20.	To Shirt (borrowed) -----	1.50
		<hr/>
		\$20.25

J. W. Riley, Cr.

1873 Jan. and Feb.

By painting

By Do 60 Boards -----	\$ 6.00
By Do 10 Boards -----	2.00
By Do 2 doz. tin signs -----	6.00
By Do sign over door -----	1.00
	<hr/>
	\$15.00
To Dead Loss -----	5.25
	<hr/>
	\$20.25

"The above," so the Doctor wrote in his diary years after, "is James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier Poet of Indiana." The "Painter Poet" was a *dead loss* in the sign-painting venture, but when, a decade later, he began to gather sheaves from the field of renown, when the Doctor read his poem "Fame," the loss of \$5.25 was a trifle quite beneath notice.

The "Hoosier Poet" borrowed a shirt for a return trip to Greenfield, his first lengthy visit home since the afternoon in June

. "he went rolling away
To the pea-green groves on the coast of day."

"James W. Riley" (so ran the local in the *Greenfield Democrat*, February, 1873) "put in his appearance on Saturday last. He looks well." He should look well. He had traveled from side to side of his native state. The excursions had taken the curves and kinks out of his routine existence. He had health. Whoever rode with Doctor McCrillus returned robust and vigorous. The sorrels and the high seat on the "Buckeye" had worked the miracle, although the Doctor attributed the cure to "European Balsam."

In his latter years Riley was silent about his youthful wanderings, yet he never ceased to remember them with pleasure. He was so grateful that he once gave the Doctor a "lift" in rhyme. Let no critic fancy he thought of the jingle as poetry. The season it saw the light was his playtime. He was playing with rhymes as a boy plays with quoits or marbles:

"Wherever blooms of health are blown,
McCrillus Remedies are known;
Wherever happy lives are found
You'll find his medicines around;

From coughs and colds and lung disease,
His patients find a sweet release.
His Oriental Liniment
Is known to fame to such extent
That orders for it emanate
From every portion of the State;
His European Balsam, too,
Sends blessings down to me and you;
And holds its throne from year to year
In every household far and near.
His Purifier for the Blood
Has earned a name as fair and good
As ever glistened on the page
Of any annals of the age,
And he who pants for health and ease
Should try these Standard Remedies."

CHAPTER VI

WITH THE GRAPHIC COMPANY

AS ALREADY intimated, the Argonaut did not work exclusively for the "Standard Remedy" vender. He and his chum sought success in other sign-painting fields. When voyaging alone they were terribly tormented, like the Argonauts of ancient time, with troublesome birds. The ugly harpies, Debt and Failure, came to snatch away their dinner and hamper their pursuit of the Golden Fleece.

They formed a partnership, the Riley & McClanahan Advertising Company, and made known their purpose on cards which they distributed in the towns: "ADVERTISE WITH PAINT ON BARNS AND FENCES—THAT'S THE WAY." Subsequently the firm was expanded, three or four partners being taken in, and the name changed to The Graphic Company, so called from the New York *Graphic*, then popular with designers. The company went through the country painting signs for clothing firms and other enterprising establishments.

One summer morning Riley was working alone, his chum having gone a short distance away to paint at the roadside. He felicitated himself on his good luck. The haze was purpling the horizon wall. The Kentucky warbler in the "sugar orchard" near by sang as sweetly as he ever sang for Audubon. Even the barnyard fowls were tuneful. To perfect the picture, children stood by gazing in wide-eyed bewilderment at the

sign as it took shape on the barnside. The sign was a large one and the barn on which he was painting it, exceptionally well located about a mile from town. He was giving his faculties free reign and had the work about half done, being overjoyed at the success of it, when a man on horseback called to him from the road: "Hello, there! you man on the ladder!" Riley looked round and waited a moment for a further bit of information.

"Get down from that ladder."

"Why?"

"Who told you to paint there?"

"The people who live here."

"Well, the people who live here rent this farm from me. Down from that ladder and be quick about it, too."

He who gave the order was a big man on any occasion, but that morning, after he had dismounted, he stood there like a certain pen portrait of Julius Cæsar—"eighteen feet high in his sandals." Riley remembered that the giant accompanied the order with an oath. "It was the oath," said he, "that brought me so suddenly down the ladder. I ran like a reindeer across the field."

On reaching his chum, all was flutter and misgiving. "What now?" asked the chum.

"Torn limb from jacket," returned Riley. "Fly! cleave the sky!—and the devil take the hindmost."

They drove hurriedly away, and when they discovered they were not pursued, Riley became calm and related in detail his harrowing experience.

The sequel is likewise interesting. Ten years later, after he had published his first book, after, as he remarked, he had "pulled the joints out of his name" so that he was James Whitcomb instead of J. W. Riley, he

returned to the old town in Grant County to give a public reading. He was the guest at a dinner in his honor. As the hours wore away, he noticed the host eying him sharply. Later in the evening, after the ladies had retired, his host said, "Mr. Riley, it seems to me I have seen you before; I can not remember where; perhaps it is my imagination, but I can not get it out of my mind that I have met you somewhere."

Now the poet was an adept in remembering faces. "Well," he replied, "out here a mile away—I do not remember on which road—there is a barn. Once there was a fellow who started to paint a sign on it and a man from town—"

"Are you the fellow—my God! You *are* the man I ordered down that ladder." The confusion of the host is readily imagined and further comment useless except to add that they were fast friends thereafter. The sign at the time was still unfinished.

The unfinished sign precipitated other woes. The "Advertising Company" had no money. They had to replenish their treasury or go to the wall. Paint tubes and glass for fancy work required cash. In their extremity they concluded to try Howard County, and after doing what seemed "a flourishing business" in comparison with previous losses, they rattled across country in an old "quailtrap" to Peru. As they approached the county-seat on the Wabash, Riley "sparkled" with memories of an old book he had read. He rallied his partner, half-seriously, about the Conquest of Peru. The royal gardens were in Peru, glittering with flowers of silver—and there were the llamas with the Golden Fleece. He and his chum were Spaniards going to plunder the Peruvian temples, chiefly that one in the heart of the city known as "The

Palace of Gold." They would sack the town and take it but they would not do it by appealing to arms. "Gold," said Riley, using the figurative language of the Incas, "is the tears wept by the sun—and we may have to weep for it. Joy or sorrow, we must have it."

Entering the town, the "Spaniards" decided to draw first on the heartstrings of the Peruvians hoping thereby to loosen their purse-strings. Just for the mischief of it, Riley rubbed soap under his eyes, assumed a mournful look and was led into the hotel as a blind sign-painter. Seating himself in the office, his chum went out in search of work. He soon found it and drew up a contract for a large sign on the front of a livery stable, the work to be done the following day by his "blind partner." Returning to the hotel he discovered a circle of curious folks around Riley, requiring, on the part of the "Advertising Company," the utmost exercise of self-control. Many were sympathizing with the "blind man" and a few were skeptical. The confusion and uncertainty continued at the supper table. The "helpless" man spilled gravy on the tablecloth while his chum indicated where the dishes were. As the meal proceeded, the waiter grew more curious and the guests more sympathetic. Riley upset his coffee with a trembling hand and at the same instant dropped a saltcellar on the floor. "Look at you!" remonstrated his chum, sharply; "now we'll have a bill for damages!"

Being "weary," as they said, "from a long day's journey," they retired early. The truth was they had to screen the transom with newspaper and lock themselves in their room so that their explosions of laughter would not be detected.

After breakfast Riley was led down the street to the

livery barn. The crowd was not long gathering, rumor of the blind sign-painter having spread during the night from Canal Street to the Cemetery. The space for the sign was high above the double-door entrance, and ample. Riley was stationed on the sidewalk and told not to move till the ladder was hoisted. With a paint bucket "hinged" to his side, he stepped falteringly to the first round and climbed clumsily to the top. He lifted his brush: "A little more to the left," said his chum from the street below—"watch your balance—higher—a little higher—there, that will do—proceed."

When ascending and descending the ladder as he had to do several times, Riley would "slip" a round and once he spilled his paint. "It was great fun," said he, "to hear the crowd talking; the skeptics and believers were about equally divided."

"That fellow ain't blind."

"Yes, he is; see his eyes."

"No, he ain't, I tell you; he's playin' off!"

"I tell you he's blind; didn't you see him fall off the ladder and spill his paint?"

"*Mein Gott!*" exclaimed a Dutchman when Riley slipped on the ladder; "I wouldn't be up dere for a coon's age!"

The work was completed in the afternoon. The crowd dispersed, and the "blind partner" was returned to the hotel where the "Advertising Company" retired to its room for more explosions of laughter. What the crowd had witnessed was, in its way, as magical and unexplainable as was the work of Phidias to the artless Greeks. It should be remembered that the "Painter Poet" was an actor. The "performance" he gave that day was something more than a series of contortions or unnatural posturings. He succeeded as

well as he did with the "Leonainie Hoax" five years later, or even better.

The next day Riley eluded the public and strolled up and down the river, while his chum secured contracts. After his "introductory" to the merchants, the chum had but to show them the sign on the livery barn to clinch an agreement immediately. Seasons of prosperity dated from that day, although most of them vanished with the rapidity with which they arrived. The Peruvians had been conquered. They gave their gold ungrudgingly. They were happy, most of all that sight had been restored to the "blind sign-painter"—glad to the core that they had been so "deliciously humbugged." "Those Spaniards," so a citizen said, "were bundles of electricity, the queerest, brightest, cleverest fellows that ever climbed over the Peruvian wall."

Although the blind sign-painter ruse was not repeated in other towns, the Peruvian method of securing business became more serviceable every day. It was a proposal that business men advertise their shops, stores and factories in the manner that had hitherto been monopolized by the patent medicine men. "That chum of mine," said Riley, "was a great chap. I fairly worshiped him because he was so successful and he worshiped me because I could do the work after he had secured the business." In selecting their victims, they looked over the county paper for the most enterprising dry-goods man. Then the solicitor "turned on the current and there was music in the air for many days." Sometimes, for diversion, he worked under an assumed name. "Evidently," he would say to a merchant, "you are the most wide-awake man in this town. We have been painting advertisements on barns and fences for a medicine firm. We know that such ad-

vertising is the most remunerative in the world. Once paid for, it lasts for years. Now there are eight roads leading out of this town. We will 'paint' you along these roads for three miles out"—for so much money.

The merchant usually "squealed" at the price. Then the solicitor drew the county paper from his pocket. "You are paying the editor so much here per inch and he advertises your competitor on the same page. Now we do not take your rival. We handle one man in one line only. By closing a contract with us you monopolize the eight roads. If you do not want it we will try your competitor." The solicitor seldom failed to "bag the game." He also succeeded with the farmers. When desiring space for a display on their barns, he had a way of admiring their horses and cattle. Sometimes he would present the wife with a dress pattern that was "very fetching."

When paid for their work the Company trod on air. They spent their money freely, and often became the prey of sharpers. As Riley said, they "were *jay-hawked* and soon compelled to embark again on the broad deep—penniless, destitute of necessities for the voyage." If at such a season the weather became inclement, old gaunt Starvation threatened to accompany them. They waited "with anxious hearts the dubious fate of to-morrow." Once, in the Land of the Delawares (Delaware County), the days were invariably dreary. "It was mizzle and drizzle," said Riley; "the week was peevish and fretful as a baby cutting teeth." And then he broke into rhyme:

"Rain, rain, go away,
Come again some other day;
The doughty 'Spaniards' want to play
In the meadows on the hay."

When the tardy sunshine did finally dawn, they "bounced from bed glad as boys who hear the first gun the Fourth of July." Borrowing a horse and buggy, and engaging to share their gross receipts with a big-hearted stranger who furnished the white lead and backed them for board and lodging at the hotel, they went forth conquering and to conquer. The whole region round the county-seat was ticketed with signs and couplets. "Merchants, not farmers," they were wont to say, "were the salvation of the land. What could plowmen do without the implement store? How could their daughters be happy without millinery establishments? How could gooseberries be sweetened without sugar? How could children be educated without the bookstore?" By such clever tactics, losses were retrieved.

Riley was invariably congratulating himself on "hairbreadth escapes from Old Starvation." One day especially set apart for thanksgiving he, with other members of the Graphic Company, was celebrating his release with some fishermen on White River near "Muncie Town." Not far away were landmarks of Red Men. It was a romantic spot. "There," wrote Riley, "the catfish winks his nimbly fins,

There all day long the bullfrog cheeps,
And yawns and gapes and nods and sleeps;
There the woodland rooster crows,
And no one knows what the pullet knows."

The fishermen were near a huge elm, whose trunk inclined horizontally across the stream. Toward noon Riley stole silently away to a farm-house for refreshments, leaving his friends to wonder what had become of him. An hour later he "mysteriously" stood on the

trunk of the tree over the river with a pail of milk in one hand and a pie in the other. Old Starvation had been vanquished. "I appeal to any white man," he began gravely, the fishermen looking up in surprise and glee—"I appeal to any white man to say that ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry and he gave him not meat; that ever he came cold and naked and he clothed him not. For my country I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbor the thought that mine is a joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one!"

"Hail to the Chief," shouted his chum from the river bank. The fishermen joined in the applause but the Chief seemed not to hear them. All afternoon he listened to other voices. His heart was a harp in the wind. The very trees "lifted up their leaves to shake hands with the breeze." Rhymes rippled on as merrily as the stream over the pebbles. "For a week," said his chum, "it was as easy to paint and jingle as it was for birds to carol." Signs ran to rhyme:

"Sing for the Oak Tree,
The monarch of the woods;
Sing for the L—M Trees
The dealer in dry goods."

Pegasus even bantered him to ride when passing a spot so unlyrical as a harness shop:

"Saddles and harness! O musical words,
That ring in our ears like the song of the birds!
But give to Pegasus a saddle from there,
And a poet astride, and we venture to swear
That the steed will soar up like a vulture and sing
To the clouds in the sky without flopping a wing."

"I am so happy," Riley remarked, "I can hear the

corn and melons growing. "I could climb a sycamore." His chum, however, the Graphic Chum, as the reader henceforth shall know him, had occasion for disappointment. For once he had failed as a solicitor. A farmer with a keener sense of the beautiful than his neighbors refused to have his new barn blemished with a sign. It was a conspicuous site—"could be seen," it was said, "from Pipe Creek to Kill Buck." The usual "bribes" offered the wife, such as a chromo or a set of dishes or a calico dress, proved futile. The chum painted his regret in a couplet at the roadside:

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these, It might have been,"

Riley promptly following with,

"More sad are these we daily see:
It is, but hadn't ought to be,"

both couplets terminating in a parody, which Riley wrote with apologies to Whittier, and subsequently printed in a county paper, beginning with,

"Maud Muller worked at making hay,
And cleared her forty cents a day."

The failure to disfigure the barn had but a momentary effect on Riley's buoyant spirit. All was sunshine and love as he passed, as is evidenced by his reflections in the early morning on looking out from a window over a new town which he had entered the night before.

"How pleasant it all was," he wrote, "how fresh, how clearly defined and beautiful—a picture from Nature's hand framed in a halo of golden light—the broad streets, and the houses with their cleanly washed faces crowding together, 'toeing the mark' in proper

order, eager for the business before them; and the voice of the milkman below, a cheery woman's voice in response, mingled with the bow-wow of a dog and the vague, startled exclamation of a rooster that went to scratching up the dirt livelier than ever, carrying on an undertone of conversation with a half dozen pullets. And then the far-off sound of an early train whose whistle pierced the thin air for miles and brought recollections of the hum of busy wheels and multitudes astir in the city far away. The birds in the woods across the common were never so glad before, never in such splendid tune. They breakfasted on music. They seemed to be too full of joy to have an appetite for bugs."

Although from Peru onward it was up hill and down dale, yet on the whole there was an increase of business, particularly after the Argonaut and his associates were advertised as the Graphic Company. Anderson was the hub of their wanderings, as it had been for the "Standard Remedy" vendings. The "Graphics" voyaged with the current. They were

"Dragon flies that come and go,
Veer and eddy, float and flow,
Back and forth and to and fro,
As the bubbles go"—

One month, north to Kendallville; another, west to Crawfordsville; one week, out to Hagerstown; the next, down to Knightstown.

Riley had a prosperous season at South Bend the fall of 1873. "I have been flourishing in the Studebaker settlement," he remarked on returning from the town. "I ranked high with the South Benders." At first he worked with a member of the Graphic Company. Later he was employed a few weeks by a local

house (Stockford & Blowney) and turned out, according to his employers, some of the most original work in the state, "the best west of New York," said they, "and second to none in Chicago." One week inside the shop he enjoyed "the glare and glitter of two hundred and fifty dollars' worth of sign work." One of his designs made a decided hit. Its dimensions were astounding. For once he had ample room for the exercise of his inventive faculty. It was a series of pictures apparently in one—"The Contrast of Forty Years"—South Bend in 1833 when a few log cabins stood on the River St. Joe, and South Bend, the prosperous city of 1873. Over against the pioneer surrounded by the crude implements of his time, stood the man of fortune surrounded by modern conveniences. Left and right respectively, were an ox cart and a Studebaker wagon; a bear and a fat cow; a fur trading post surrounded by Indians and a commercial emporium surrounded by pleased customers; a well-sweep and a gushing fountain; a judge holding court in a shanty by the river and a modern stone court house; a flatboat and a steamboat; a boarding house and a big hotel; a prairie swamp and a Brussels carpet; a stump and a cushioned rocking chair; an ax and a gold-headed cane; the log hut and the palace; a family with no news at all and one with books and the daily paper. "It was gigantic," said Riley. "South Benders were surprised to learn of their crude beginning. It took two men a week to paint it."

At South Bend there also were rounds of social enjoyment and participation in musical programs. There he heard Bret Harte, who had been an inspiration to him since the days he read him in the woods with the Schoolmaster. The lecture renewed his interest in the

Argonauts. His twenty-fourth birthday had just glided by. After it, he was particularly happy when the Graphic Chum or any other member of the Company referred to him as the Forty-Niner in quest of the Golden Fleece.

As the seasons passed, the "Graphics" grew more spectacular. They were a band of roving, roistering fellows, all young men filled with a desire to see the world. Like Washington Irving when drifting about Europe, all they wished was a little annual certainty wherewith to buy bread and cheese—"they could trust to fortune for the oil and the wine." The chief end of their wanderings was amusement. Riley was a kind of prince among them.

"To hear him snap the trigger
Of a pun, or crack a joke,
Would make them laugh and snigger
Till every button broke."

His regalia was a thing to remember. "I wore for evening dress," said he, "a tall white hat, a pair of speckled trousers, a spectacular coat with gilt buttons, and carried a cane. We made lots of money." A twenty-dollar bill was a mammoth sum to him then. When doing outdoor work, he did the lettering on windows, painting the letters on the outside of the glass instead of the inside, thus saving the necessity of tracing them backward. He would paint on the sunny side of the street in the heat of July till the perspiration streamed from every pore. Fear of sunstroke never entered his head. There were occasions when a reunion of some sort drew people from the country. The result was a crowd to watch the "Graphics." On special days, for the sake of good advertising, one member of the Company would dress in a spotless frock coat and

trousers, a Derby hat, and patent leather shoes. Riley wore overalls. Sometimes a partner would paint them with vivid stripes and bars. Then would succeed an Indian war dance which soon blocked the street with spectators. However busy the rovers were, whatever the number of contracts for work ahead, there was always time to manifest the holiday spirit. There was a dearth of merriment when Riley was absent. His companions hungered for his return.

"We take pleasure," they wrote while he was sojourning a month in Greenfield, "in expressing to you our appreciation of your talents and social qualities, and desire you to make us a visit in behalf of 'Suffering Humanity.' We would respectfully solicit your companionship for a week or so if your business will permit a holiday of that length of time." Signed—Very respectfully, F. H. Mack, W. J. Ethell, James Whitmore, James McClanahan (The Original Graphic Advertisers).

While his advertising companions predicted a future for Riley, average observers did not regard him as unusual. He was an animated form of good humor—but "genius was a long way off." The spectators who stood around him in little towns were not looking for that spark of fire in the fellow who drew pictures on the hotel register and danced with his companions as he went down with the "gang" to the station to see the train come in. Genius did not reside in the man who carried Doctor Pierce's Memorandum Book in his pocket, painted signs for the village baker, and whittled and told stories in the store on rainy days. There were evidences of sign-painting in the neighborhood of every town from Lafayette to Ft. Wayne, but the genial public did not consider the occupation a stepping stone

to poetry. It was not to his credit that Riley was often "doggrelling when he should have been daubing." All advertisers however marked one thing: that he was no "humbug of the brush," and later they learned he was no humbug of the pen. To imitate nature, they observed, artists must not turn their backs on her. They can not paint outdoor scenes indoors. Riley knew this. "The delicacies of light and shade," he read in *Christie Johnstone*, "can not be trusted to memory. The highest angel in the sky must have his eye upon them and look devilish sharp, too, or he shan't paint them."

There is evidence along the way from Peru to South Bend that the Argonaut was not in the advertising mood all the time. The "Graphics" held him to his agreement with difficulty. The Golden Fleece he sought was not the almighty dollar. If they made thirty dollars a day, as they did in periods of prosperity, it was unsafe to tell him before the end of the week. If on Thursday, for instance, he "accidentally" learned that the receipts for three days were ninety dollars he was inclined to quit. "That's enough; let's rest." Nor would he be driven. When his associates insisted on work beyond what he thought was a reasonable demand upon him, he would "hide away, loaf and write," and appear as mysteriously as he had disappeared the week before. It was rumored that he shared the time with Cupid. Love (so ran the scrap in his vest pocket) —

"Love is master of all arts
And puts into human hearts
The strangest things to say and do."

There was most certainly a drawing upon his heart-strings from home. He had been reconciled to his father. The latter had been courting, too, and at such



"LOGAN'S" SPEECH TO THE FISHERMEN

"BABE" McDOWELL.
J. A. DIXON.

J. W. RILEY.

THE GRAPHIC
ADVERTISERS.

WILL J. ETHELL.

CLINT HAMILTON.
TH. EDWARDS.

J. H. McCLANAHAN,
Business Manager.

Merald Print. Anderson, Ind.

GRAPHIC COMPANY BUSINESS CARD



RILEY & McCLANAHAN BUSINESS CARD

a season found forgiveness the easiest thing in the world. His letter (omitting irrelevant items) reads as follows:

Greenfield, Indiana, August 27, 1873.

My Dear Boy:

You can't imagine how anxiously I have been expecting a letter from you. I wait—wait—wait with anxious hope—but no James comes home. He writes to others but not to me; I don't think it exactly right—for really I think I am more anxious to hear from you and more desirous you should come than any other.

I have as you doubtless know, another half in the person of a Quaker lady, who kindly welcomes you also. She often wonders and inquires why you do not come. I write you with your photograph and its indorsements in my hand. It looks somewhat natural. The hair obscures the upper part of the countenance too much; and the expression is somewhat sad. The indorsement ("He is dead now") I suppose is irony, for report says you are a very lively corpse; the other ("He was a good boy") is literal I hope. Having passed boyhood years, and glided into manhood, you are, I trust, a very good and prosperous man. That other expression ("Oh, my God!") on the back of the photograph—I do not know how to interpret that. I hope it is not an exclamation of despair or pain, but a real reverent recognition of God, coming from the heart, and with the certainty that He is indeed your God, and will be ever near them that call upon Him in faith, believing.

Now, my Dear Boy, please write me frequently; let me know how and where you are and how you are doing—and come home as soon as your business will allow. Believe me ever and truly

Your Father,

R. A. RILEY.

When the "Graphics" sang "Hail to the Chief," there was financial significance in the strains as well as melody. Riley had originated the big sign idea. At his

suggestion a brother of the brush, said by friends to have been one of the most eccentric sign-painters of his generation, painted "the largest sign in the United States," on a covered bridge over White River. "It took all the white lead in Anderson to paint it," was Riley's word. Newspaper notices of it appeared as far away as Minneapolis. It caught the attention of a well-known threshing machine company in Ohio, who employed its designer to paint their trade-mark on the factory—a featherless rooster on a wall sixty-five feet high.

While his brother of the brush was painting the trade-mark, Riley received a substantial offer from the Howe Sewing Machine Company. He had done the gold lettering on a few sewing machines for the company, when in Peru. The time seemed auspicious. "Poetry to the bow-wows," said his Graphic associates. What they desired was to see Riley reap the reward of a growing reputation. That reward meant the loosening of purse-strings for their benefit. Riley, however, was not in the least inclined to mass a fortune.

The period covering his sign-painting adventures was radiant with variety. He touched merriment at all points. One of his partners had once been a deacon and had a letter recommending him to "the brotherhood elsewhere as a member in good standing." Noting with amazement the wide contrast between his conduct and the standard set by the church Riley advised him to hold on to the letter. "If you ever put it in a church," said he, "you'll never get it out."

Prior to the time his friend painted the mammoth sign on the White River bridge, Riley related with great glee his blind-painting experience at Peru, how he had "turned his eyes wrong side out, spilled his paint

on the ladder" and so on. "I'll go you one better some day," said his friend, and he did—at the bridge. The river was at the flood. A crowd of farmers and townsmen had gathered on the banks to see the sign expand. While painting from the top of a ladder above the middle pier, the painter suddenly slipped and fell into the turbid waters and was borne like a porpoise down the stream. He was an expert swimmer and, by diving under floating driftwood, eluded the gaze of the screaming crowd, passed a river-bend below and came to shore. Scattered here and there in the crowd were friends (secret participants in the ruse) who proposed to drag the river. They had succeeded in awakening anxious sympathy when the "drowning man" appeared, and arm in arm with his friends smothered his laughter and walked away to town, leaving the crowd in utter ignorance of his design. For a long while, say thirty years after, there were Andersonites still living who did not know that the "accident" was planned and executed by a poet and his crafty associates.

Along with amusement came hardships. Riley had with manifold pleasures what he called a surplus of disappointments. "Although I whined a great deal at the time," said he, "these were not to be deplored since the best rises to the top in extremity. At Warsaw I met a contributor to a local paper (Mr. S. B. McManus), who put spurs on my determination to win recognition. I carried my poem, 'The Argonaut' in my overalls till it was a confusion of paint spots and ragged edges. It had been declined by every paper on the 'White Pigeon' line from Jonesboro to Michigan. My Warsaw friend liked the poem. The papers had accepted him and he said they would accept me. A simple remark—it was a slender rope he

threw me; doubtless he did not realize the encouragement he gave, but it was long enough to reach the barque of a lone soul drifting by." As Riley went on from town to town he was cheered by the success of men whose outlook had once been as dismal as his own. He particularly recalled Bret Harte, how after writing and rewriting, he had taken the prize in a thousand-dollar short story contest. Recognition was not an impossible thing. His poem, "The Argonaut," went to rags with his overalls. As he once remarked, he "told but half the tale and lost that; left the song for the winds to sing." But his hopes were not wrecked. He began to think of other poems, such as "Faith," "Toil," and "Some Day."

The "White Pigeon" line demanded money for transportation. The Argonaut had none. At one time he offered a pair of sleeve buttons for a railroad ticket. As the Graphic Chum expressed it, "he was insolvent, had not enough *sugar* to reach the next town." Some bitter recollections clustered round Marion. He lived in a joyless room, had to spread newspapers on his bed to keep out the cold. Board bills came due and there was no money to pay them. In the coldest weather he was what Robert Burns calls the most mortifying picture in human life, a man seeking work and not finding it. Outdoor work was impossible and indoor work—there was none. He numbered a few post-office boxes, but the remuneration was not sufficient to pay lodging. "My host," said Riley, recalling the days, "proprietor of a little rat-trap of a hotel across the street from the brick church, was also out at the elbows. Together we moved furniture and all to Huntington, drove in a wagon through the rain thirty miles—and through the night, too; the moon was not a dazzling disk of

brilliancy nor were the stars splintered glitterings of delight."

Business revived. Soon he bought a forty-dollar overcoat and drifted down stream to meet his chum at Wabash. He was always bringing up with the Graphic Chum, the man of fickle fancies. He had scaled orchard walls with him and made love to melon patches;

"Through the darkness and the dawn
They had journeyed on and on—
From Celina to La Crosse—
From possession unto loss—
Seeking still from day to day
For the Lands of Where-Away."

They were the Siamese Twins of the sign-painting business, "who had rolled in the game from the time their happy remembrance began." At Wabash they made such a favorable impression on the chief merchant of the town that he proposed to send them to the country to seek work in his family carriage. "We can't use that carriage," remonstrated the chum, "the paint will splash it." "Then we'll go without paint," said Riley; "not every day can sign-painters afford a carriage."

"Nothing can come from nothing." So Reynolds, the painter to the king, had said in the "British Book." "In vain," he wrote, "painters or poets endeavor to invent without materials on which the mind may work, and from which invention must originate." The Argonaut acted on the suggestion at every turn in the road. He was getting an education. As if sign-painting and many other occupations of those years were insufficient, he joined a baseball club. He did not play—"served as a catcher one afternoon only." He did, however, conceive the idea of getting together the "crack players" of the county. He pitted the "Andersons" against

the "Muncies." From this came his "Benson Out-Bensoned," an inferior prose sketch printed later in a county paper, but chiefly remembered for the part it played in an early lecture failure.

He was acquiring material—from books as well as from men and affairs. To the "Graphics" he was a mine of quotation. "Keep to the right—quote poetry about that if you dare," said one of them as they were traveling a country road. Instantly the Argonaut repeated the old English Quatrain:

"The Law of the Road is a paradox quite,
In riding or driving along:
If you go to the left you are sure to go right;
If you go to the right, you go wrong"—

a muddle that was strikingly illustrative of incidents throughout the poet's life. Over and over things he started to do went wrong. The simplest efforts often ended in complexities.

"The pranks men play live after them." So Riley mused one day while riding on the "Buckeye" with the Standard Remedy vender, who had just received a sharp note from a preacher in a Dunkard settlement. "There is a sign out here," wrote the preacher, "that shocks the neighborhood." The Graphic Company, including one whose name was Ethell, had painted a sign near the Dunkard settlement and had subscribed their names as usual. With a simple twist of the brush, Riley obscured the first two letters in *Ethell* and capitalized the third, so the signature read, Riley, McClanahan & Hell. This was not done to discredit Ethell, who was one of the most blameless men of the Company. As a farmer remarked, "It was simply the prank of a prankish poet." The sign was changed and the preacher's wrath softened,

but not before the "Graphics" and "Standard Remedies" had suffered injury. Talebearers had been busy. Pious farmers, passing and repassing the sign, had retailed the scandal. In due time the good people of the neighborhood began to talk about the "Hell Company." A circuit rider, observing the mischievous conduct of the members of the Company around the tavern and deploring their improvident use of money, remarked that the reproachful name contained more truth than poetry.

Riley sings of the joy and pathos of that vagrant time in "Dave Field." Field had shared the happy-go-lucky experience up and down the old "White Pigeon" railroad:

"Let me write you a rune or rhyme
For the sake of the past that we knew,
When we were vagrants along the road,
Yet glad as the skies were blue.

"Let me chant you a strain
Of those indolent days of ours,
With our chairs a-tilt at the wayside inn
And our backs in the woodland flowers.

"Let me drone you a dream of the world
And the glory it held for us—
With your pencil-and-canvas dreams
And I with my pencil thus.

"A sigh for the dawn long dead and gone,
And a laugh for the dawn concealed,
As bravely a while we still toil along
To the topmost hill, Dave Field."

So many poems are traceable to the restless excursions of the Graphic period that it seems ungracious to berate it. They interpret Riley's life amiss who

deplore those pleasures and hardships. Whatever may be said of his wanderings and the temptations and delinquencies occasioned by them, the fact is that he regarded them a part of his education. The voice of the "wanderlust" had in it the ring of authority. He answered it—and the reward was the experience his genius required.

One should look with kindly eye upon his first inclination to be a sign-painter, prompted by his reading the Life of George Morland. Of all sketches in the "British Books," Morland's life was, to Riley, the most fascinating. Morland's career had "the sharp sword of necessity at its back." The youthful Riley sat with him among sailors, rustics, and fishermen while the rooftree rang with laughter and song; he called to the drivers of the coaches; he hallooed to the gentlemen of the whip; he rode the saddle horses from the White Lion Livery and went all in a quiver when the artist painted signs. The rapidity of his work surpassed comprehension. As time elapsed Riley manifested some of Morland's characteristics. Like him he became a roving sign-painter, and at times a dispenser of conviviality. Like him he seemed to possess two minds—one, the animated soul of genius by which he rose to fame and made himself victorious over many ills of life; and the other, "a groveling propensity," which in his youthful days sought persistently to wreck his fortune and condemn him to the gaiety and folly of dissipation.

Re-reading the book, Riley noticed Morland's originality—his style and conception were his own—he was always natural—he found things to charm the eye in the commonest occurrence—he was a painter for

the people, all the people, the good and the bad, the rich and the poor. "Morland's name was on every lip," he remarked in an after time; "painting was as natural to him as language; he opened his heart to the multitude. The mistake he made was not in going among the reptiles, for such his associates of low degree were called, the mistake he made was in lowering his conduct to the level of their debauchery. He *had* to see them. Did he not paint four thousand pictures? It was genius to make the pictures; it was not genius to delight in degradation."

Moralists have claimed that Riley should not have read Morland's Life. There were homes in Greenfield where the book was forbidden. The fact, however, remains that Riley repeatedly read the book and never expressed a syllable of regret for having done so. Another thing equally significant is the fact that although he was fascinated with the book, he never wasted his young manhood in the wild, imprudent manner of the British artist.

When older, Riley always made it clear that a poet had to know the people before he could write verse for the people. He had to be bewildered with living before he could write "A Ballad from April." After he had found "a man for breakfast," as the phrase ran, after he had mingled with the section gang and had seen an Irish mother weep over the mangled form of her son, after he had signed the pledge, talked Temperance and worked right and left in the "blue ribbon movement," then he could write "Tom Johnson's Quit."

Here in Riley's erratic days, as in the lives of so many men eminent in art and literature, is the question of the wheat and the tares, the intermingling

of good and evil. Ruskin cites the instance of an artist, not only tolerating but delighting in the disorder of the lower streets of London, "the web of his work wrought with vices too singular to be forgiven," yet enough virtue and beauty left in him to make him "supreme in the poetry of landscape," great and good qualities sufficient to make him the "Shakespeare of painting." In all genius, some one sagely observes, there is a touch of chaos, a strain of the vagabond; and the admirers of genius in all ages, and particularly the friends of poets have avoided many erroneous and damaging conclusions by remembering this fact.

On the whole then, friends of literature are not to deplore the Graphic days. They are to rejoice that Riley

"Roved the rounds of pleasures through,
And tasted each as it pleased him to."

They are to smile when

"He joined old songs and the clink and din,
Of the revelers at the banquet hall,
And tripped his feet where the violin
Spun its waltz for the carnival."

They are to be glad, though it is more difficult,`

"That he toiled away for a weary while,
Through day's dull glare and night's deep gloom;
That many a long and lonesome mile
He paced in the round of his dismal room;
That he fared on hunger—and drunk of pain
As the drouthy earth might drink of rain.

.

“So the *Argonaut* came safe from doom,
Back at last to his lonely room,
Filled with its treasure of work to do
And radiant with the light and bloom
Of the summer sun and his glad soul, too!—
Came to his work with tuneful words
Sweet and divine as the song of the birds.”

CHAPTER VII

WHILE THE MUSICIAN PLAYED

THE reader is now to consider another phase of a restless life, which in point of years blends with the employment of time in sign-painting. The Argonaut has joined himself to a band of home companions. His excursions are musical and confined chiefly to the streets and highways of his home county. His joyous occasions suggest a season of May-time when he crowded years into a few brief months. The nights were long, deep and beautiful, chiefly the "silent afternoons of the night," as he so finely wrote, "when the heavens poured down upon him their mellow wine of glory." He painted signs by day and reveled in music by night. "With the fiddle and the flute," said one of his home friends, "he and his companions drifted out under the stars and laid the pipes for popularity with the girls." It was the season of sweet singing voices, as he wrote in a fragment on "A Tune"—

"Sweet as the tune that drips
From minstrel finger-tips
That twang the strings
Of sweet guitars in June
At midnight, when the moon
In silence sings."

Life was a dancing medley and heartily Riley responded to its charms as did other young men of the town. He heard the tinkle and drip of the music that

they heard, but his heart was also responsive to melodies they did not hear. While sharing the charms of rollicking society, his thought also floated

“Out on the waves that break
In crests of song on the shoreless deep
Where hearts neither wake nor sleep.”

His love of music developed early. There was rhythm in the rock of the cradle. Unlike Whittier who knew little of music and could scarcely distinguish one tune from another, Riley reveled in “the concord of sweet sounds.” As he grew older he could repeat any air after once hearing it. At the age of five he heard a violin for the first time at a neighbor’s house where children had gathered to listen to a country musician. The sensation was delicious; the child caught his breath as children do in woodland swings. “He danced on the steps,” said his mother, “in an ungovernable spasm of delight.” The prattle of childhood was blent

“With the watery jingle of pans and spoons,
And the motherly chirrup of glad content,
And neighborly gossip and merriment,
And old-time fiddle tunes,”

as the poet happily sang in *A Child-World*. Then followed his boyish interest in the band wagons that glittered with a splendor all their own while he marched with boys of high and low degree in circus-day parades. He had visions of a time when he should travel with a circus and dangle his feet before admiring thousands from the back seat of a golden chariot. A little later, at the age of twelve he was charmed with the music of the Saxhorn Band, the old Greenfield organization that marched away to the war in 1861. A serenade at the farther edge of town one midnight before their

going, awakened in the youthful Riley heart a rapture undefined. Few lads would have lain

"So still in bed
They could hear the locust blossoms dropping on the
shed."

In his school-days Riley often took more interest in drawing and music than in his books. There was a picture in his geography of a herdsman lassoing wild horses on the pampas of South America. Riley drew in place of the lasso, a guitar, with which the rider was beating a horse over the head. "The guitar is a light instrument," he once remarked, "but that was not giving it light treatment. The horseman wore a gaily colored scarf, which reminded me of a Spanish cavalier, and that suggested the guitar."

What dreamy visions ranged over the "arch of creation" in those callow days of youth. The old National Road, blossoming with its "romance of snowy caravans" ran like a pageant through the town. Along with its ox-carts, its Conestoga wagons and chiming bells, it brought the unriddled mysteries of music and love. "Bright-eyed, plump, delicious looking girls" were not strangers to Greenfield and the long highway that bisected the town.

Lovers and poets, according to John Hay, are prone to describe the ladies of their love as airy and delicate in structure, so angelic that the flowers they tread upon are greatly improved in health and spirit by the process. The girls who traveled the National Road were not of this ethereal type. Nevertheless they were beautiful. "Their hair rippled carelessly over their shoulders," said Riley, "and many were graceful as quails." An emigrant with his wife and daughter came

slowly westward on the Road one sultry evening and camped on the common, the "village green" at the edge of town near the Riley homestead. The arrival of a charming maiden just ten years old, who could play an accordion and sing, was an event and the budding Riley knew it. Her stay was brief, the family "dropping into night again," westward bound to the land beyond the Wabash. But she had remained long enough to teach him how to play the instrument—long enough to become his "first love." She also is credited with being the original of the poem, "The Old Wish," suggested by a falling star. When he became a man, Riley remembered himself as the callow lad in love with the little "accordion wonder." "Brief but beautiful," he said,

"For my wild heart had wished for the unending
Devotion of the little maid of nine—
And that the girl-heart, with the woman's blending
Might be forever mine."

The "village green" was the trysting place a few years later for another musical episode. In those days he did not leave home to find answers to his dreams. They floated to him from distant lands, from the dawn and the unknown—and he was happy. "I was not nomadic then," he remarked when older, pleasantly alluding to a merry strain in a McGuffey *Reader*,

"Quite contented with my state,
I did envy not the great;
Since true pleasure may be seen
On a cheerful village green."

Out of that primitive train of old-fashioned wagons on the National Road there drifted one May morning a "prairie schooner" with a family from New Eng-

land. It was a long wintry way they had traveled. The horses having dwindled to the ghost of a team, the family halted on the "green" and christened their anchorage "Camp Necessity." It turned out that they remained for the summer, renting two rooms with a time-worn portico in front where morning-glory vines climbed up the trellis to smile at hollyhocks on the gravel walk. There was a musical daughter in the family, who was known to her new friends as "Anna Mayflower," to celebrate her native Yankee State and the month of her arrival in Greenfield. Her winsome manners and her guitar soon drew a circle of young folks around her. Ere long Riley came, first to take lessons on the guitar—and later, lessons in love. One autumn evening as he approached the gravel walk he heard music of a doleful character—

"The long, long weary day
Has passed in tears away,
And I am weeping,
My lone watch keeping."

"Why that melancholy wail?" he asked on entering her door.

"I am going away."

"Away?—where—to Sugar Creek?"

"No—to the Great North Woods."

"Promise me," said he, "you'll never sing that dirge again"—and so far as the lover knew, she kept her word.

The next week the transients were westward bound again, and the lad and lassie were "weeping—their lone watch keeping." Letters were numerous between Greenfield and the North Woods and tradition has it that they were love letters. Time passed, a few years only, and the music of his soul found expression in

words. Caressing his recollections of "Camp Necessity" and the portico (which for the sake of meter he changed to "balcony"), he wrote "The Old Guitar," cherishing the while

"A smile for a lovely face
That came with the memory
Of a flower-and-perfume-haunted place
And a moonlit balcony."

The sequel was an incident that touched his heart tenderly. After the guitar had moldered into decay and the old airs had become pulseless, long after the poet's heart had been bruised by the Bludgeon of Fate, long after "Anna Mayflower's" address had been lost and forgotten, there drifted to his desk one day in the city a letter from the Michigan woods, just as twenty years before the author of it—a maiden of sixteen—had drifted into Greenfield. The maiden was a mother now. She and her children were rejoicing that Fame had come down the National Road and found two books—*Rhymes of Childhood* and *Afterwhiles*—"two books," she wrote, "that will survive the wrecks of type and time—two books that will live

'As long as the heart has passions,
As long as life has woes.'"

When about twenty years old Riley began to think seriously of becoming a musical performer. "I coopered on the banjo, bass viol, piano and organ," said he, recalling the musical days; "I could play on anything from a hand-organ up to credulity. I started out with a flageolet. You know that remarkable instrument. It has a goitre in the neck, and swells up like a cobra de capello. You play into one end of it and the performer is often as greatly surprised at the output as the

hearers." Those were the sleepless days for his neighbors. They

"Hopelessly asked why the boy with the horn
And its horrible havoc had ever been born."

"He was the plague of the streets," said a Greenfield resident; "when he played on the porch, the neighbors went in and closed their doors and windows." He could sing, too, especially songs in dialect, although, according to his own opinion, the chief thing about his voice was that it gave *variety* rather than pleasure. He had friends however kind enough to say his singing was alone worth the price of admission. He was amateurish enough to thrum such old favorites as "Twenty Years Ago," "Old Kentucky Home," "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," and "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming." He twanged comic songs on the banjo, indeed, wrote two or three himself, the idea literally creeping into his mind that he might some day be a character-song man and compose his own selections. Although possessed of ear, taste and genius, he had neither the inclination nor the persistence to learn the notes. Like Gainsborough he took his first step, but the second was out of his reach and the summit unattainable. "I don't read music," he said, "but I know the dash and swing of the pen that rained it on the page." No one could so certainly as he detect it in the sound

"Of dim sweet singing voices, interwound
With purl of flute and subtle twang of string
Strained through the lattice where the roses cling."

The one thing his musical years have to offer is variety. Reading between the lines, one discovers that the purpose of the Muse was the education of her child.

She would have him climb by failures, by experience, by slow degrees. In her eyes the waste basket was as essential as the "Poet's Corner" in the weekly paper. She was content if in a hundred lines she could find one crystal, knowing that as her favorite grew to maturity the crystals would increase.

"When the Fates," it has been observed, "will that something should come to pass, they send forth a million little circumstances to clear and prepare the way." The Fates decreed that Riley should not be a musician, but it took some time to bring him round to that conclusion. One of the little circumstances was an accident while he and a few companions were driving to a village to take part in a musical program. A special feature of the evening was "an original poem" by the "Distinguished Poet of Center Township." It was a raw, snowy day. They drove a mule to a "jumper-" sled, an animal that was as perverse and unreliable as the wind. "The mule," said Riley, "scared at an object in the tanyard, ran off and recklessly distributed our musical instruments along the road. Like Brom Bones, we met the devil. My friends found me bruised and unconscious, in a heap astride the 'bull-fiddle' in a fence corner. Fate was trying to tell me I was not to be a musician."

The original poem, "Joe Biggsby's Proposal," was the hit of the evening although it made young Riley as nervous as the lover he tried to depict, who in reality was none other than himself. "It's about a fellow," he read,

"About a fellow that both of us knows—
It might be Thomas or John—
The awkwardest fellow, we'll just suppose,
That ever the sun shone on;

So awkward he stumbled and fell in love
With a most pretty girl at that,
With a voice as sweet as a turtledove
And eyes as black as my hat"—

in all, twelve stanzas about his lady-love, which the "Distinguished Poet" subsequently consigned to the waste basket.

It was in those caroling days that he made his début as a bass drummer in a brass band. "You should have seen him abuse a base drum," remarked a band member. He soon hammered himself into the enviable position of snare drummer, and in the Greeley campaign became a regular member of the band—the Greenfield Cornet Band, succeeded by the Adelpian Band, to which he gave the name, and "two removes," said he, "from the old Saxhorn Band of the war days," (so named from the band instruments which bore the celebrated Saxhorn label). Technically, the Cornet Band was superior, due largely to the interest Riley awakened in good music. "A poor brass band," he remarked, "away from home one day can do more damage to a town than twenty enterprising citizens of that place can repair in ten years." He was an *irregular* member of the Adelpian Band and "glad of it," he said, "for when the notes came due for their extravagant band wagon, the creditor could not reach me by legal proceedings. Pay a band note? I did not have enough money to liquidate a notary fee." It was with difficulty that the Adelpians saved their wagon from the sheriff's hammer.

A solace for the Adelpian boys in those insolvent days was a huge marble cake with three pieces especially wrapped in fancy paper for the "Poet." The cake was the gift of sweethearts, who thus expressed

to their lovers their gratitude for a "joy ride" in the new band wagon. Contrary to the ladies' expectation, the Muse was languid. "Oh, Muse!" the "Poet" wrote,

"Inspire our 'Faber No. 2'
To dull itself, at least, with something new;
Command it hence at Fancy's Fate to chapper
On Three Graces in a paper wrapper.

"The pleasures manifold of this sweet feast
Would fill a dozen pages at the least,
But, Ladies, we'll inflict you with but *one*—
With trifling change we quote from Tennyson:
It 'gentler on digestive organ lies
Than tired eyelids on tired eyes.'
For this entendra you will please excuse
A blunt lead pencil and a drowsy Muse."

The country "joy ride" afforded an enlivening experience. While the band boys with their sweethearts were on their way to a Blue River town a storm befell. As Riley remarked, "Old Jupiter Pluvius took part in the performance. The rain beginning to vex the fields, the contents of the band wagon were crowded into a barn, and held there a whole rainy day." As usual, when merriment was required, the Adelphians drew on Riley's fertility of resources. Recalling that the scene in Hogarth's *Strolling Actresses* was laid in a barn, fitted up like a theater, he resolved to assemble a similar company of performers, not for the amusement of mankind, but for the pleasure of a community on Old Brandywine. He improvised a kind of rural opera and, barring the half-dressed figures on the old English playbill, it bore some resemblance to Hogarth's *The Devil to Pay in Heaven*. Instead of ancient deities for dramatis personæ, he had the Adelphians and their

sweethearts and he saw to it especially that no damsel should represent the "Tragic Muse."

After feasting on a picnic dinner, the players cleared the barn floor and opened their "Country Drama" with a polka as joyous and wild as the music that struck wonder and applause to the hearts of "The Jolly Beggars," the whole company dancing to the cornet, violin, guitar and violincello.

"Wi quaffing and laughing,
They ranted and they sang;
Wi jumping and thumping,
The vera girdle rang."

Then it was a fandango, a hornpipe, a quadrille, a charade, or masquerade—anything to end the day in a carnival of enjoyment. The Adelphians were not wanting in powers of invention, particularly if accompanied by their sweethearts. The program was both musical and theatrical. That night, after the storm, when the moon rose out of the woods to flood the barn floor with light and tangle her beams with dancing feet the Muse found another *thread of gold* for the Golden Fleece. She was not drowsy in "The Last Waltz":—

"What happiness we had,
When that last waltz went mad
And wailed so wildly sad—
So weirdly sweet—
It seemed some silver tune
Unraveled from the moon
And trailed, that night of June,
Beneath our feet!

"A marriage of glad hands—
A gleam of silken bands—
A storm of loosened strands—
A whirling sea.—

The broken breath—the rush
Of swift sweet words—the flush
Of closed lids—and the hush
Of ecstasy!

“O ‘Love’! O long delight!
O music of that night!
The seasons in their flight
Have not been false;
The arms that held you then,
Enfold you now as when
I kissed you, first of men,
In that last waltz.”

War Barnett, a member of the old Saxhorn Band, recalled that Riley's efforts to play on musical instruments lacked the patience of persistence. The Adelphians, however, marking Riley's enthusiasm a few years later, noted a beautiful exception—his love of the guitar and the violin, chiefly the violin. Leaning over his instrument, the hope in his heart grew sweeter than songs without words. Just as Longfellow embodied the spirit of poetry in the majesty of the sea, the everlasting hills, and the ever-shifting beauty of the seasons, so Riley embodied the spirit of music in objects of simple interest and love, in the old-time fiddler, in the robin teetering on the bough, in a merry boy at play, in the maiden tripping through the meadow grass. “Tilt the Cup,” he besought the hunter boy,

“Tilt the cup
Of your silver bugle up,
And like wine pour out for me
All your limpid melody!
Pouch your happy lips and blare
Music's kisses everywhere,
Wave o'er forest, field and town
Tufts of tune like thistledown,
And in mists of song divine
Fill this violin of mine.”

His desire to play on the violin was quickened into a passion at the age of nineteen. He read stories and legends of Ole Bull, the Master Musician, "who lived in the ideal world, whose language was not speech, but song." To Riley the great Norwegian was a modern Orpheus. Birds came out of the thickets, and dancing streams stayed their onward feet. A fairy throng of elves and spirits whirled in wild delight around him (so he read in Longfellow) and mingled with these were

"Screams of sea-birds in their flight,
And the tumult of the wind at night."

Ole Bull's violin, too, was the magical *harp of gold*. The pine and maple from which it was made had rocked and wrestled with the wind in the Tyrolean forest, on the Italian side of the Alps, where sunshine and sea infused melody into the trees. There was something also in the folk-type of the Norwegian land similar to that of Hoosierland. The people were animated, enthusiastic and practical—"a curious combination," it was said, "of the prosaic and the ideal." Such a combination made Norway rich in men of genius as like conditions have since produced like results in Indiana.

To hear Ole Bull and to see his violin became a fixed purpose. "I would walk fifty miles," said Riley, "to see the diamonds in his bow."

Although Riley was forty years the junior of Ole Bull there was a striking similarity in their lives. The ruling passion of each was an abiding love of home country. The poetry in its scenery and the native merit of the people took hold of each from childhood. That of Norway was reflected in Ole Bull's style of play-

ing and gave to his selections the charm of originality that never failed to captivate his audience just as the rustic beauty and simplicity of Indiana were afterward reflected in the ballads and public readings of the poet. "Eagerly I devoured all myths, popular melodies, folktales and ballads—these made my music," said Ole Bull. He is a short-sighted student indeed who can not find a similar influence in the development of the Hoosier Poet.

Stories of Ole Bull were in the air and the effect was to stimulate Riley's enthusiasm to hear him, to the point of determination. There was then no life of the Norwegian. "We'll write one," said Riley. He prepared a sketch which he carried about in his "reticule" and later laid away for safe keeping in a trunk. "I did not need the sketch," said he, "to quicken a passion for music. I already had that. What I needed was assurance and hope. If Ole Bull had wrought great things from humble beginnings, perhaps I could. He was self-taught. He played his own pieces. Coming under the influence of Paganini in Paris, he definitely adopted the career of a violinist. I was hopeful enough—call it a foolish dream, if you will—to believe a like fortune would attend me."

To Riley there was something alluring in the Ole Bull testimonials. Many were printed in western papers, "a rattling good one," said he, "by George William Curtis," who had lifted the master violinist to a pedestal beside that of Jenny Lind. "Critics," said Curtis, "might dash their heads against Ole Bull at leisure, the public heart would follow him with applause because he played upon *its* strings as upon those of the violin. His nature sympathized with the mass of men. He was so full of life and overflowing with

vigor that he would impart that sympathy at all hazards."

There was "a darling tribute" by Lydia Maria Child. "Ole Bull played four strings at once," she wrote. "The notes were tripping and fairy-like as the song of Ariel. He made his violin sing with a flute-like voice, and accompany itself with a guitar, gentle and musical as the drops of the rain. How he did it I know as little as I know how the sun shines, or the spring brings out its blossoms."

Such language to the heart of youth was electrical. The purpose to hear the master violinist became a consuming fire. Twice Ole Bull came to large cities of the West, but they were too far away. Riley had not yet solved the problems of dress and long distance transportation. "His old friend, Poverty," said an Adelphean, "was sticking closer to him than a brother. He still enjoyed the luxury of borrowed clothing; and the misfits, or tightfits, worn sometimes with a Greeley plug, reminded us of a dandy. Silver and gold he had none. All he had to offer was poetry." Happily he did not have to ride a long distance to hear the Master.

The winter and spring of 1872 was for Indianapolis a season of platform kings. Wendell Phillips came in January to talk on "Courts and Jails." He was followed by J. G. Holland on "The Social Undertow," and he by Josh Billings on "What I Know about Hotels." Then came Robert Collyer with "The Personality and Blunders of Great Genius," and Mark Twain with "Passages from Roughing It." All these Riley passed by.

One day when all things were feeling the tonic of the spring, the following announcement appeared under "Amusements" in the *Indianapolis Daily Sentinel*:

ACADEMY OF MUSIC
THE WORLD-RENOWNED VIOLINIST
OLE BULL
(Assisted by Eminent Artists)
IN GRAND CONCERT
TUESDAY EVENING, APRIL 16 (1872)

To Riley the announcement was like the south wind blowing over spring flowers. Outwardly he was happy, but "inwardly," said he, "my life had been a bleak December. Something was tugging away at the core of existence and I did not know what it was. I only knew that the mystery of it meant misery to me." His soul was burning within him. He was peering into the darkness, like the author of the "Raven," wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before. He was yearning for some knowledge of his mission.

At the Academy of Music, however, the "misery of existence" faded. "Leaning forward to catch the first strains from the harp of gold," said Riley, "I was glad as a lover among the sheaves of harvest meadows. In imagination I saw Ole Bull behind the curtain draw his violin from its ebon case, tune and hold it close to his breast, poising the bow in his outstretched hand like a magician's wand. I could almost squeeze fragrance from the tunes before the curtain was rolled up." It did not matter to Riley that he had an inferior seat. What did he care? Ole Bull had sold his last shirt to hear Paganini, and had been content with a seat in the topmost gallery in Paris to hear Malibran.

At last the golden moment came. There on a Hoosier stage the rapt Musician stood, the silver of sixty win-

ters on his brow, the dew of youth in his heart,—stood there just as Longfellow had said:

“Blue-eyed, his aspect blithe,
His figure tall and straight and lithe,
And every feature of his face
Revealing his Norwegian grace;
A radiance streaming from within,
Around his eyes and forehead beamed,—
The Angel with the violin,
Painted by Raphael, he seemed.”

All that Longfellow had said of the Norwegian was only a faint reflex of what he was. His soul was in his music. The violin talked for him. He played it because he loved it. Riley's own interpretation of the hour, a memory written years after, was brief, but charged with feeling:

“Why it was music the way he stood,
So grand was the poise of the head and so
Full was the figure of majesty!—
One heard with the *eyes*, as a deaf man would,
And with all sense brimmed to the overflow
With tears of anguish and ecstasy.”

He played “A Fantasia on Lily Dale,” “The Carnival of Venice,” and “My Old Kentucky Home” with variations. Chief interest centered in “The Mother's Prayer” which was *played* and *heard* with the deepest emotion. What seemed so miraculous was the discovery that the extraordinary man played the most difficult selections “with the ease of a common fiddler playing a jig or hornpipe.” And such sustained perfection—he played three or four parts without a hint of discordant note. Occasionally his music was capricious; as some said, “he resorted to tricks with his instrument,” but never for an instant was it wanting

in the poetry of his interpretations. The performance was a combination of *strength* and *love* and "that," said Riley, "makes a miracle any time in any land." He played as if he had just found a violin, played as Emerson said he played in Boston—"the sleep of Egypt on his lips."

The criticism Riley particularly emphasized was that Ole Bull's music "went to the heart of the musically ignorant and carried the educated by storm"—just as his own public readings were destined to do in the famous afterwhiles. He felt like calling the grand old artist "the only violinist." The encores (the "Last Rose of Summer," "The Nightingale," and "Home, Sweet Home") were inexpressibly lovely. "The Arkansas Traveler," said the reporter, "was played with such rollicking abandon that the audience broke all restraint and drowned the sound of the instrument with applause. A happier audience never left the Academy of Music." Riley went out "feeling that something beautiful had passed that way—something more beautiful than anything else, like the dream of dawn or the silence of sundown."

He returned to Greenfield—as he said—"a gentleman of good family and great expectations." He was flushed and exultant. "Music was the climax of the soul." The great violinist was the sole object of his thoughts. "Did you meet him?" asked his friends. "Why should I?" was the prompt rejoinder. "You don't have to shake hands with a man to know him. Don't you know how friends are made? Fellowship exists whether we meet or not. I have known Ole Bull all my life." Leaving some of the wiseacres to doubt his sanity, he hastened to his room. He drew the Ole Bull "Sketch" from his "reticule" and read it again. His resolution to be a vio-

linist had received such impetus that nothing—to his way of thinking—could break it. “Hope told a flattering tale.” She pointed out the resemblance in his life to the early struggles of Ole Bull for recognition. Similarity ran back to childhood. There was no promise for Ole Bull in the schoolroom as there had been none for “Bud” Riley. “Take to your fiddle in earnest, my boy,” the old Norway rector had said; “don’t waste your time in school.” Ole Bull’s genius refused positively to go into a straight jacket. How had he learned to play? God had taught him—it was said—by a process as simple as that of the mocking bird. When a child he had seen in a meadow a delicate bluebell swinging in the wind; in his fancy he heard it ring while the soft voices of the waving grass accompanied it. “I know what he heard,” said Riley, and so promptly did he accent the value of his opinion by relating incidents in his own experience, that lovers of the beautiful never for an instant doubted his word.

After the immediate enthusiasm over the concert had subsided, Riley bethought himself of the road to success. He went back of Ole Bull to Paganini for a motto which he narrowed down to “Work, solitude and prayer.” In the “British Books,” excellence in painting and sculpture was chiefly the result of incessant application and he was convinced that music demanded like concentration. With Ole Bull and Paganini it meant practice twelve hours a day. Nevertheless, he was not intimidated. He would sound the possibilities of music, and to this end he played on every violin he could borrow. When the owner declined to let him take it away from the house, he remained and played in the kitchen. To use his own words

he "even accepted invitations to canter over the strings while dancing feet jarred the chinaware and windowpanes." Friends remember that he leaned lovingly over the violin and that the strains were lyrically sweet. "There was a room in the old Dunbar House in Greenfield," said an Adelphian, "where he played hour by hour to drown discordant sounds such as the grist-mill, egg-beaters, and the rattle of the street." To such he opposed "Home, Sweet Home," "The Cottage by the Sea," and "The Suwannee River" with variations of his own improvising. Ole Bull had composed his own music and he would do the same.

Thus he practised and thus he forecast his future in the musical world with prospect of reward when he was sorrowfully confronted with the result of an accident, which, trivial as it seems, can not be overlooked since it actually did turn and alter his career, as trifles frequently do in this world, where a gnat, according to Thackeray, often plays a greater part than an elephant, where a mole-hill can upset an empire. "Great God!" exclaimed the old *Greenfield Commercial*, "on what a slender thread hang everlasting things!" The accident was a caprice of the wind. The *Commercial* further observed that winds are born to be capricious. They ramble at will among trees and poets

"And love and cherish and bless to-day
What to-morrow they ruthlessly throw away."

What the wind really did—to say it curtly—was to slam a door on Riley's thumb. "The wind was mad," said he, "stark, staring mad; running over and around town, howling and whooping like a maniac."

At first the injury was not considered serious, although he had to dress it daily and carry his hand in

a sling. But when afterward he devoted time daily to the violin, the wounded finger complained, the pain increasing as he increased the hours of practice. One night, all alone, it was sadly borne in upon him that he was not to be a violinist. "You say a short thumb is a little thing," he once remarked. "I say it is a big thing—it was *then*." When he fully realized he could never grip the violin as he had seen the Master Musician do, the sense of disappointment was akin to that which would come over a man were some familiar mountain-top to sink suddenly and forever from sight. Riley was more sensitive than many of his contemporaries. What others suffered lightly he suffered keenly. It was destiny's way of making him a poet—to him then a heavy-laden, shadowy way. A Frenchman remarked with a smile, that the whole face of the world would probably have been changed had Cleopatra's nose been shorter. "That remark should not provoke a smile," said Riley. "The sage should have said it with gravity; it was the truth. Walter Scott, when a child, sprained his foot. *Ivanhoe* and the other Waverley novels were dependent on that sprain. Had Scott not been lame he would have gone into the army. The gates of great events swing on small hinges."

Only the few who despise the day of small things will smile at Riley's grief. The many will share it, for reasons made clear to them by turning-points in their own lives. They will perceive what has been often observed, that defects are made useful to men. Ignorant of ourselves, Shakespeare tells us, we often beg our own harms, which the wise powers deny us for our good. Subsequently when Riley began doing his life work with the pen, he saw that the angel of adversity had denied him the realization of one dream



JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY
Age twenty-two



OLE BULL, THE MASTER MUSICIAN
From photograph Riley carried as a mascot

that she might bless him with the fulfillment of a greater. Obedient to the angel's prompting, he wrote his popular poem, "Kissing the Rod." Ever after, his letters to sorrowing friends harmonized with the message of that poem. "No mortal condition," he once wrote, "is better than the one God seems to weigh you down with. In my *own* case I am coming every day to see clearer the gracious uses of adversity.—Simply it is not adversity.—It is the very kindest—tenderest—most loving and most helpful touch of the hand Divine."

Though yielding to the decree of fate, Riley's interest in music never abated. The man who held that painting is the poetry of color, sculpture the poetry of form, and music the poetry of sound, could not at any time of his career be far from the heart of the musical world. His debt to great composers was always acknowledged. For years after the concert he idolized Ole Bull, and carried his photograph in his "reticule" on reading tours as an omen of good fortune. No one understood better than he the love of Ole Bull for his instrument. When he escaped from a burning boat on the Ohio, Riley was "happy as a hummingbird." The picture of the Master hugging his violin as he approached the Kentucky bank of the river was never effaced from Riley's memory. "I would have thrown up my hands," said he, relating the story to a railroad conductor, "but Ole Bull was a Norseman; he had courage. If ever you have a wreck and find in the debris the unidentified body of a man with a fiddle in his arms, bury it without further inquiry as the remains of Ole Bull."

In those days of "strange pale glamour," although the Argonaut did not see it, he was, nevertheless, ascending more rapidly than he dreamed to the niche he

was destined to fill. Cromwell was not a poet, but he gave to the inscrutable ways of destiny a poetic interpretation when he remarked that one "never mounts so high as when he knows not whither he is mounting."

CHAPTER VIII

ATTORNEY AT LAW

THAT the Hoosier Poet ever seriously thought of groping among the technicalities of the law for the Golden Fleece seems to lovers of verse unbelievable. They are aware (according to the myth) that there was a wild sea to sail over, dragons to fight and gods to assuage before the hero could bring the Fleece home; but for an Argonaut of the poetic order to pommel felons in court and be pommelled by opposing lawyers seems a perversion of gifts. Riley did not practise law, but he had friends who were bent on his doing so.

As has been seen, his first ambition was to be a baker. At the age of five his joy was complete when he could fashion a custard pie. His father, however, desired him to be a lawyer and that desire preceded the ambition to be a baker. It was another one of those erroneous paternal dreams of a profession for a gifted son. To enumerate them would make a book:—Schiller forced to study law till his dislike for it approached absolute disgust. Longfellow, writing his father that the *legal* coat would not fit him and the father insisting that he wear it. "Nature," said the son, "did not design me for the bar, or the pulpit, or the dissecting room." The father of Ole Bull striving to make a lawyer of a violinist, and Lowell's father exacting a promise from his son that he would "quit writing poetry and go to work." For twenty years Reuben Riley

dreamed of the law for his son Whitcomb. He dressed the boy in a blue coat and trousers, and carried him to the old log court house, lifted him to a seat in a window, and was overjoyed when his brother attorneys poked the little fellow in the ribs and called him "Judge Riley." The son tells of the incident in his own inimitable way: "A peculiar man was my father. About the third thing I remember was that he made my first suit of clothes. I was three years old at the time—too young, in fact, to be taken out of pinafores, but my father insisted that I should have a pair of pants. My mother protested, but father would have his way. He stepped off quietly to a store and bought the cloth without saying a word. Then he cut out the suit and made it with his own hands. The coat was a marvel of art. Imagine it, a little three-year-old with long pants, a vest with a red back and buckle, and cut like a man's. Then he took me day after day to the courtroom where at that impressionable age I saw many people with many eccentricities. Imagine the queer figure I must have cut among them with my hair white as milk and my face freckled as a guinea egg."

"It was my father's ambition," Riley remarked on another occasion, "to make me a lawyer, and I struggled to satisfy his wishes; but bless you, that profession was not my bent. I could not learn the stuff fast enough to forget it." The jumble in his mind was accented by the confusion of tongues in the courtroom. Attorneys might see wisdom in the proceedings but to him all was "dense with stupidity." The charge of a rural justice to the jurymen (a story Riley sometimes repeated) illustrates his confusion: "Gentlemen, if you believe what the counsel for the plaintiff says, you will find for the plaintiff. If you believe what the counsel for the

defendant says, you will find for the defendant. But if, like me, you believe neither the counsel for the plaintiff nor the counsel for the defendant, the Lord only knows what you will find."

Riley in a courtroom was an illustration of Schiller's story of Pegasus at the cart and the plow. Nature does not design poets for such employment. But give them range for the exercise of their genius, as Schiller points out, and they will rise kingly, unfold the splendor of their wings and soar toward heaven. What had Riley to do with the wilderness of code and precedent?

"In the nice sharp quilllets of the law,
Good faith! he was no wiser than a daw."

Washington Irving was an adept in the profession compared with Riley. A friend, referring to Irving's admission to the bar, remarked that "he knows a little law." "Make it stronger," said the attorney—"darn little." What a farce, Riley, in substance, once observed (drawing the quotation from a favorite novel), a bench-leg poet among members of the bar, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words, and making a pretense of equity with serious faces; think of me in a fog of bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references and reports—think of me floundering in a courtroom with that mountain of costly nonsense piled before me!

To Riley the law seemed a device to pull wires, an effort to dodge, evade and prevaricate—"the suppression of truth, a juggling with justice." It was the devil take the attorney. As a brother poet expressed it:

“Here lies John Shaw
Attorney at law,
And when he died
The devil cried,
Give us your paw
John Shaw
Attorney at law.”

“The epitaph contained more truth than humor”—such was Riley’s caustic opinion when in an intolerant mood. “The law will never help the race,” he was wont to repeat, “till it hangs men, not for what they do, but for what they are.”

“*The civil law*,” screamed Martin Luther, “*good God!* what a wilderness it is become!” “Mark the words,” added Riley, when he read them; “there is a call for house cleaning when a *preacher* exclaims against it. You can’t get truth by cross-examination. An attorney can curl you up on the witness stand like a burnt boot.”

Thus he would go on till some of his friends in the profession would hit back. “Stop your flings at the law,” said a notary; “in one week I have seen enough in the life of an *author* to shame the devil in his palmyest days!”

“So we plow along,” returned Riley, “so we wag through the world, half the time on foot and the other half walking.”

“*He* never studied law,” said one of Riley’s early friends. In a sense, that is true. He read but he never studied. He lost interest when he discovered that “Blackstone would not rhyme with Minnesinger.” He was never admitted to the bar; he, of course, never had a client. “My chief asset,” he once moaned, “consisted of hopes for the future—and hopeless they

were. I saw myself dwarfed and poor as Daniel Quilp, my office like his, a little dingy box on a side street in Tailholt, with nothing in it but an old rickety desk and two wood blocks for chairs, a hat-peg, an ancient almanac, an inkstand with no ink, and the stump of one pen, and an old clock with the minute hand twisted off for a toothpick."

"*He never studied law!*" The following anecdote seems to confirm the observation: When making a new book, Riley sometimes sent out a *ferret* for fugitive poems. While serving him in this capacity, a stenographer, searching through the old files of a newspaper found the poem, "To the Judge," which the poet had entirely forgotten—could not recall that he ever wrote it. Two lines of one stanza (as printed) ran as follows:

"Can't you arrange to come down?

Pigrouhole Blackstone and Kent!"

"Pigrouhole! Pigrouhole!" repeated Riley. "Who is Pigrouhole? I was a May-day failure at the law, I know, but I ought to know who Pigrouhole is." He looked in an English cyclopedia, thinking Pigrouhole was a contemporary of Blackstone. Then he searched a French dictionary, thinking the barrister with the vexatious name might be a Frenchman. At night he called in a lawyer friend. "You are an attorney," said he; "tell me who Pigrouhole is." "Let me see the lines," said his friend, puzzled over the strange name. He read them a second time—

"Can't you arrange to come down?

Pigrouhole Blackstone and Kent!—

Can't you forget you're a Judge

And put by your dolorous frown

And tan your wan face in the smile of a friend—

Can't you arrange to come down?"

"You mean *pigeonhole*," said his friend; "your word is a *verb*. *Read your poem*—you are asking the Judge, the friend of your youth, to quit the dust of the town for the country."

"Let us pray," added Riley.

The only time Riley ever had "a case in court," he was both defendant and counsel for defendant. It was a farce but deserves a place in his annals for its saving grace of humor. Sometime prior to his study of Blackstone, while returning in a band wagon from a concert, a dispute arose with one of the band boys which ended, said one of them, "in a fair display of courage and violence." His antagonist turned upon him with such scurrilous terms as "thief" and "liar." "I could lick you for saying that," said Riley, "if I could spare the time." It turned out that he had to spare the time. In the scuffle which followed, he pitched his foe out of the wagon. The poet recalls the incident in his lines on "The Strange Young Man." For obvious reasons he calls the wagon a "jumper"-sled, and disguises himself in the chap with the dyed mustache,

"Who got whipped twice for the things he said
To the fellows that told him his hair was red."

The offense being a sweet morsel for the town marshal, Riley was accused of "assault and battery" and brought before the Mayor for trial. The defendant asked for jury trial, and six "law-abiding frecholders" were selected to decide his fate. He chose for counsel an eccentric young fellow of the county, who had been established in a pretentious looking office with a new library, by his father, a wealthy farmer. The father had placed money to his son's credit in the bank and told him "to cut loose." The "Squire" (for so his cronies called him) like the defendant was short on

clients as well as knowledge of the law. Riley's was his first case—and his last.

At the trial the spectators consisted chiefly of the "Squire's" friends (so called), loafers around his office, who for some time had dreamed of getting their money's worth from his hour of confusion. When the lank and lean "Squire" appeared with his arms full of law books, they gave him their full measure of applause, which was promptly met with the Mayor's threat to "clear the galleries" if repeated. After witnesses had been examined and counsel for plaintiff had finished, the "Squire" rose to make his maiden speech. "While he was getting himself together for the greatest effort of his life," said one of the cronies, "Riley rose before the jury and began the argument." He reversed the situation, made the "Squire" the defendant and himself the counsel.

"Sit down," said the "Squire," pulling Riley by the arm; "sit down; I'm your lawyer."

"Never mind, 'Squire,'" returned Riley soothingly; "be calm; I'll clear you all right." Turning again to the jury, Riley was "about to lay the wreath of praise on an untarnished name," when the "Squire" stepped before him more imperative than ever—"Sit down," repeated the "Squire," "sit down—you're crazy!"

"Your honor," said Riley, addressing the Mayor, "I do not make a business of insanity. If I did, you would not let me run at large in the streets of Greenfield." Turning to the "Squire," he was more vehement: "Sir, your imputation of lunacy I spurn with loathing. Though American born, the blood of Wallace and Bruce runs in my veins;

'And if thou said'st I am not peer
To any lord in Scotland here,
Lowland or Highland, far or near,
Lord Angus, thou hast lied!'"

Contrary to all expectations, the "Squire" sat down. Riley continued, deftly directing the thought of his hearers to himself as culprit and defendant: "My Lords and Gentlemen," (turning to the jury) "we have arrived at this awful crisis;

'Absent thee from felicity awhile,
In this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To hear my story.'

Having bowed to the jury, he made a pretense of addressing them at length by recalling the court language of Sampson Brass in *Old Curiosity Shop*. "It is my duty, sirs," he said, smiling roguishly, "in the position in which I stand, and as an honorable member of the legal profession—the first profession in this country, sirs, or in any other country, or in any of the planets that shine above us at night and are supposed to be inhabited—it is my duty, sirs, as an honorable member of that profession to throw a little light on a disagreeable phase of civilization. I would offer some reflections," he continued solemnly, "on the poor crab-tree of human nature, its weakness and the difficulties attending its obedience to moral perceptions." But scarcely had he launched his argument when, the whole scene ending in an uproar of laughter, the Mayor dismissed the case and cleared the room.

The poet's "lyre" of after years, Bill Nye, was convinced this story of "Pegasus in court" was not a tradition, "not by a mile," said he, "and a Dutch mile at that. How do I know? Because Riley is so provokingly silent about it. Mention it and he is as dignified as the king of clubs; he is as *grave* as the private cemetery of a deaf and dumb asylum."

Riley entered his father's law office in the spring and

remained until September, 1875. He gave the law a second trial the year following, "but that," he said, "did not count." It counted for literature however, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter. Not all the time was devoted to law books—"those inexpressive looking books," as Dickens told him, "that never had anything to say for themselves." An hour or two each day he studied the figures of rhetoric, punctuation and prosody, as taught in *Harvey's Grammar*. "As to syntax," said he, "there was nothing to it. I soon discovered that metaphor and hyperbole were my long suit. Prosody was a barren waste—dactyls, spondees, iambics and trochaics the acme of confusion. Measure and rhythm I had by nature—the names I did not need." What was more significant was the new interpretation he attached to a familiar quotation, one he had sometimes seen on the blackboard in the school-room. The hour had arrived to put it in practice. He began seriously to *think* for himself:

. . . . "One good idea
But known to be his own—
Better than a thousand gleaned
From fields by others sown."

In July the law student's meditations were seriously and tragically interrupted. A negro was captured in the woods near Blue River, brought to Greenfield and hung in the Fair Ground. Riley was not one of the mob but was persuaded the next morning to go out and see the body. "I would give a United States mint," he said, "to efface that picture from my memory. Reynolds was persuaded by Boswell to attend the execution of a robber at Newgate. The people criticized him—and rightly. What has *art* or *poetry*

to do with the murder of a human being!" To make the lesson doubly impressive, Riley went on to recall the hanging of an outlaw in the Red Buck country and how an editor had "duly reported it all and sounded a note of warning," as told by Bret Harte. "But the beauty of that mid-summer morning," Harte had added, "the blessed amity of earth and air and sky, the awakened life of the free woods and hills, the joyous renewal and promise of Nature, and above all, the infinite Serenity that thrilled through each,—that was not reported, as not being a part of the social lesson."

To Riley's way of thinking, "laws were too frequently made to trap the innocent." The gentlemen of the courts, as he saw it, were working at the wrong end of the problem. "Let the jail go the way of the dungeon. Give men better food; give them better guides, better fathers and mothers, better homes when lying in their cradles." Nor could the people fold their arms under the plea of innocence. "Like Paul," he said, "they stand by, consenting to the death." This view so tragically wrought upon him in those *student* days was later expressed in "His Mother," a poem he thought Boards of Pardon and others interested in penal institutions had strangely overlooked. Briefly the thought in it is this: The Law takes the life of a wayward boy for a brutal offense, the mother comes for her dead—her own son,

"God's free gift to her alone
Sanctified by motherhood.

"I come not with downward eyes,
To plead for him shamedly,—
God did not apologize
When He gave the boy to me."

Thus in anguish the mother cries out against the "red-handed" crime of the state. Since the Law has killed both mother and son, how will it face the Judge of all the earth in the Hereafter?

"For days," said Riley, recalling the gloom, "the memory of the lynching hung over the law office like a London fog." His native town had trampled without remorse upon a mother's love—the most sacred and precious emotion in life. "A London fog!" he moaned. "The bewildering stages of the law and the staggering roar of human beings when they turn their fury into the screech of the mob—w'y, a London fog is but mist over a frog pond compared to that!" There was fog everywhere, fog up and down Brandywine, fog on the lowlands and on the heights, fog creeping through the houses, fog above the church steeples, fog in the eyes and hearts and minds of men, fog on the prospect of human improvement. It was the outcry of outraged feeling, the pang of despair—and it lasted for a fortnight after the lynching. Then succeeded a period of unrest. As the weeks wore away the *law student* began to sigh again for the unhackneyed existence of outdoor life, something wild and full of adventure. He was ready to spread his sails wherever any vagrant breeze might carry him. "Would that woes might end," he murmured,

"That life might be all poetry
And weariness a name."

Indoor employment brought a decline in health. The doctors said he could not live unless he got more sunshine. Friends advised him to travel. "They might as well," said he, "have advised me to promote a railroad. I couldn't buy a ticket to the county line." A

few wiseacres said, "Stick to the law; it will bring you wealth and fame"; but health was not to be weighed in the balance with profit from a profession.

"Health, it beats wealth;
And what will *fame* profit us
When the same comes to us
In our sarcophagus?"

CHAPTER IX

WITH THE WIZARD OIL COMPANY

ROMANTIC history in all times has its legends of wandering heroes who delight to make their beds under starry skies. Again and again they beguile the roadsides and airy heights with a scanty supply of provisions and an inexhaustible stock of ballads and songs. They follow "the traveling mountains of the sky." Their hearts respond wildly to the "Song of the Road" —

"For one and all, or high or low,
Will lead them where they wish to go;
And one and all go night and day
Over the hills and far away."

The zestful "Song" was in the air over Greenfield the last week of summer, 1875. Pegasus, lean, thirsty and hungry, had been unhitched from the post in front of the law office. The gipsy spirit was abroad. There were calls from Fortville, Pendleton, Middletown, Newcastle, Farmland, Winchester, Union City, and towns in Ohio, and the *law student* was eager to answer them. The Argonautic propensity returned—the desire to wrestle with the ways of the world and give his fancy range in new lands. He literally longed to have no settled place of abode, to live and wander about from place to place, sleeping at night in barns or at the roadside. Nature intended him to be a vagabond. If the worst came to

the worst, he, like Washington Irving, could turn stroller and pick up a living along the highways.

"Humanity in its developing stage," an early friend wrote him, "is a good deal like yeast—liable to bubble up and boil over without giving you warning." He was in the bubbling stage. The hour had come to go—he was resolved on flight. But how fly? Fancies are free—but fares cost money.

"It is my opinion," said Riley, recurring to those days, "that the ways for our feet are *found*—not made. We strut about like peacocks and boast of our achievements and fame;

Is it by man's wisdom that the hawk soareth,
And stretcheth her wings toward the south?

There I was in Greenfield, *blue* as the zenith over my head, no money, no way to leave town except walk, and right out on the National Road the dust was flying and the fates fashioning my way of escape. Down that road came the Wizard Oil Company, a band of musicians and comedians in a traveling chariot drawn by horses that cantered and ran as if they were ballasted with quicksilver. The manager of the company had discharged a man at Knightstown. I took the vacant place, mounted to a seat beside the manager and bowled away to Fortville."

The company, hailing from Lima, Ohio, had been an annual visitor to Greenfield since 1870. The local Adelphian Band had caught the theatrical spirit and gone straight to the hearts of Greenfielders with an original number entitled "The Wizard Oil Man." The "Wizards" had mingled freely with Greenfield musicians, sometimes helping out in serenades and playing at socials and church entertainments. They usually

appeared the week of the Fair, but Riley had no assurance that they would reappear in 1875. "All was hanging," he remarked, "on what the wind said."

Lovers of their native heath may be inclined to reproach Riley for leaving Greenfield with such glee. Truth to tell, never before nor afterward did he leave with such satisfaction. He was sick in body but also sick at heart. He was a fugitive from the "London fog." Before leaving he went to bid a chum good-by. "Quit the town," said he half seriously; "stay here and they'll swing you to a tree in the Fair Ground." But the joys of the road soon restored his spirits to a hopeful view of the human species. Within two weeks his affection for the old town was as warm as ever.

Before he reached Fortville he was in a roguish vein. He was one of "the jolly party of chirping vagabonds." The Wizard Company gave him a brimming welcome, "smiled all round in a gust of friendship," glad to roam the country with such a merry-maker. "He waded immediately," said one of the comedians, "boot-top deep into our affections. We laughed at his stories; everybody humored him, everybody bet on him." Before nightfall his heart was running riot with pleasure as in the "Standard Remedy" days three years before. He "snapped at verse as ravenously as if he were a crafty lawyer nipping the unguarded admission of a witness." His talk was in superlatives. Like Stevenson, he proclaimed himself a bird of Paradise. He was lured forward and backward by an unbridled imagination. He shared the destiny of all the living—he chased his favorite phantom. The highway fairly scintillated with jingle.

Feigning he was a thousand miles from home and calling back down the dusty road to a resident of his

native town, who had just swished by the wagon like a "highway comet," he craved a special favor:

"If you ever live to see
The sunny town of Greenfield—take a message there
for me,
Take a message and a token to some distant friends of
mine,
For I was born at Greenfield, the year of Forty-nine."

At Pendleton he came from a barber shop with:

"Greenfield barbers cut my hair
And Pendleton and Hewitt—
But none kin cut it anywhere
Like Fortville Frank kin do it."

Near Newcastle, passing a bareheaded camper at the roadside who was curling his mustache before a broken mirror, he tossed his nomadic brother a sample of his dialect—

"I washed my face and combed my hair
Keerfully over the bald place there;
Put on a collar—fixed up some,
And went to church—I did—by gum!"

Pausing a moment near the site of an old trading point where tradition said Red Men had been burnt at the stake, he mourned their fate. However they had not died in vain. It was something that comedians could stand on mother earth where the Red martyrs had perished,

"Where from their ashes may be made
The violets of their native land."

It was great joy to pen capricious lines. Great pleasure, too, to make pencil sketches, a row of sunflowers for instance, "chinning the fence" like happy children at the roadside.

Driving right and left over undulating counties with September skies above—it was like a cruise on a billowy sea. Fairy isles were ever looming up mistily in the far-away. The Argonaut was steeped in an atmosphere of dreams—"such gracious intervals for reflection," he remarked of the time, "such endless hours of languor." He was a lover fanned by the warm winds of the deep—

"And so we glide
Careless of wave or wind,
Or change of any kind,
Or turn of any tide.
Where shall we land?"

After a cruise of two weeks he landed at Union City, on the state line, "a fussy old-hen-of-a-town," he wrote two years later, "clucking over its little brood of railroads, as though worried to see them running over the line, and bristling with the importance of its charge." The immediate view of the place was almost entirely concealed from him by a big square-faced hotel—not an attractive town although it had "one division of the Sons of Temperance, one factory, two newspapers, two banks, two hotels, three lodges, five churches and nine dry goods stores and groceries." Notwithstanding its unsightly appearance, Union City promptly took a seat in the family circle of Riley annals. Here, within a few weeks "in the rear of the spacious and brightly illuminated store, Bower's Emporium," he found material for his most popular sketch in prose, "A Remarkable Man."

On arrival, he immediately took time to answer a letter from his Greenfield chum, J. J. Skinner, who of all the friends left behind was the one most likely to send good news from home. His friend was not living

on "the shadowy side of the street." The letter, omitting "foreign items," is Riley's own account of the two-weeks' outing:

Union City, Sept. 14, 1875.

Dear John:

We have just driven in here and it is good in finding your letter in waiting for me. It is full of news "and that of the very best." I am having first rate times considering the boys I am with. They, you know, are hardly my kind, but they are pleasant and agreeable and with Doctor Townsend for sensible talk occasionally, I have really a happy time. We sing along the road when we tire of talking, and when we tire of that and the scenery, we lay ourselves along the seats and dream the happy hours away as blissfully as the time honored baby in the sugar trough. I shall not attempt an explicit description of all that I have passed through, but will give a brief outline. We "struck" Fortville first, as you already know—stayed over night and came near dying of loneliness. There is where I "squeeled" on street business, that is, that portion of it where I was expected to bruise the bass drum. Well, I have been "in clover" ever since, and do what I please and when I please. I made myself thoroughly solid with "Doxy" (the playful patronymic I have given the Doctor) by introducing a blackboard system of advertising which promises to be the best card out. I have two boards about three feet by four, which during the street concert, I fasten on the sides of the wagon and letter and illustrate during the performance and through the lecture. There are dozens in the crowd that stay to watch the work going on that otherwise would drift from the fold during the drier portion of the Doctor's harangue. Last night at Winchester I made a decided sensation by making a rebus of the well-known lines from Shakespeare—

"Why let pain your pleasures spoil,
For want of Townsend's Magic Oil?"—

with a life-sized bust of the author; and at another time

a bottle of Townsend's Cholera Balm on legs, and a very bland smile on its cork, making a "Can't come it" jesture at the skeleton Death, who drops his scythe and hour glass and turns to flee. Oh! I'm stared at like the fat woman on the side-show banner. Sunday night we stayed at Morristown, a little place with two stores and one church, I shan't include hotel, although the proprietor of the coop we lodged in insisted on calling it that. There was nothing left us here but to plunge into the vortex of dissipation the inhabitants, or natives rather, indulge themselves; and so we went to church,

"And heard the Parson pray and preach,
And heard his daughter's voice
Singing in the village choir,
For we had no other choice."

We gave them a little music in the morning in our glee at leaving the town, and far back in the perspective I caught the flutter of rags on a tow-headed boy. I breathed a silent prayer for my deliverance. Ah, my boy! the feeling of the breeze on my face.

We shall stay here during the Fair doing street work at night only in the city. I was here you know some two or three years since and I expect to find a girl or two who will still remember me, but it doesn't really matter whether they do or not, for a smile or two seldom fails to "bring them down"—especially Fair time. I have met several of the boys I used to know. I am in for a good time. You see I have nothing to do but my boards and I sometimes drift away from the wagon for hours and "Doxey, white as snow, never kicks."

The *law student* had now been away from home a fortnight. He was returning to pleasures of the road. The relief from the gloomy solitude of the law office—how could he sufficiently thank Heaven for that. Little Nell with the dream of fields and woods and riversides ahead was not more joyous.

"I shall never forget," said Riley, "how ashamed I

was in Fortville to have a cousin of mine see me beating the bass drum with that show. But that was the blur of a moment. It turned out just as I had foreseen. The Doctor was a good fellow and he helped me amazingly. By the time we struck Ohio I was strong and well. He had a way of giving a healthy moral twist to what we were doing. His black chargers were the apple of his eye. 'Brave horsemanship, my boy,' he would fondly say as we bowled along, 'gives rise to sparks of resolution and wakens the mind to noble action.' "

Doctor Townsend was a pioneer in his line, "a gem in the rough," his comedians said, "as loving and kind in heart as any man living." He traveled in good style. In addition to his fine horses, his equipment consisted of a covered wagon with side seats for his company—and always an ample supply of the "Cure Alls," the "life savers," such as Magic Oil, Sarsaparilla, Liver Pills, Cholera Balm, and Cough King. Of musical instruments there were the bass drum, the bass horn, banjo, violin, tubia, and B-flat cornet.

The Doctor was a "proficient B-flat," and a good singer of either bass or soprano. "Riley was a good singer," said a comedian, "but would not risk his voice or reputation in the open air." He was content to teach other members of the company rare old songs such as "Our Uncle Sam," and at the evening performance charm his hearers on the violin with such old-timers as "The Devil's Jig," "Fisher's Hornpipe," and "The Arkansas Traveler" on four strings, "with apologies to Ole Bull."

The company started for the next town in the morning, arranging to reach it at noon just as the "scholars" came from school. The toot of a horn woke up the

farm-houses along the road and circulars were scattered broadcast. At the edge of town the band began to play and parade the streets. The Doctor gave two "lectures" a day, one in the afternoon, but the principal one at night, when they lit the torch lamps and brought out the decorations. In county-seats, when it was Fair week, the people came in throngs. When they crowded the performers, Riley with his blackboards and cartoons was elevated to a position on the wagon to divide honors with the Doctor. In Ohio, Riley was introduced as the "Hoosier Wizard," and the performance he gave with his voice and brush was remembered when other features of the show were forgotten. "He was the center of light," it was said,—

"The weary had life, and the hungry had bliss,
The mourners had cheer,—and lovers a kiss."

Fair week the throng was always interesting. The weather being warm, the women and girls wore white dresses, and, said a spectator, "they were ornamented with the furbelows of fashion." "When the moon rose to blend her light with the decorations and costumes," said Riley, "I was transported to the land of the Arabian Nights. It was an Aladdin show." Sometimes he recited "Tradin' Joe," then entitled "Courting on the Kankakee." Sometimes he appeared in a character sketch, assuming the rôle of an old man or a school-boy. Occasionally, turning up his coat collar and wrapping a red bandana about his neck, he entertained his hearers from the steps of the wagon, introducing an original ballad, followed by a comic song. "The ballads," said he, years after, "came from incidents and experiences on the road. They were written on dull, hot Sundays in selfish country towns where the church

bells barked at strangers while lazy men lolled round in narrow bits of shade."

At Fort Recovery where the rain drove the comedians to a hall above a drug store, the lads and lassies danced to the music of Riley's violin. At Covington, where they remained several days, entertainments were given on the top floor of the new school building. At another point the Doctor succeeded in renting a church for his show.

The "Wizards" were the Troubadours of 1875. Like their brothers in sunny France, their wits were sharpened, their versatility broadened and their store of songs and anecdotes replenished by what they saw and heard. Their merry-making was alluring. "Bright eyes flashed for them and many times picket gates swung softly open as they approached."

They reached the Magic Oil laboratory the first week in October. For the rest of the season Lima was to be the hub of their travels. Fifty or sixty miles out touched the rim of the wheel. Again Riley cast a backward look to Greenfield. The Forty-Niner was a man in years but in spirit a boy. He was not yet detached from the influence of his "salad days," as instanced in extracts from a letter written on his birthday at

Lima, Ohio, October 7, 1875.

Dear John: (To J. J. Skinner.)

I shall not enter into any particulars with regard to the pleasure with which your letter was received—let it suffice you to know that I gorged it "blood raw," I was so hungry to hear from you. What a gust of news it contained; it almost raised my hair—two first class sensations spiced with little breezy notes which I devoured with special relish. I thought this place without an equal in regard to its "increase in crime," but

I must knock under for the present for old Greenfield. A saloon keeper was shot here last week and no particular stir made about it, nor the man missed. There may be an ordinance though that all saloon keepers be killed when found without muzzles. And just here let me remark that what little prosperity I now enjoy in the shape of a plug hat is an intimation of my estrangement from the saloon keeper. May God help me on my good way.

I "stand in" with the best men of the town and am rapidly growing in public favor. I'll be out in book form yet. I wish you were here to room with me at the nobbiest little boarding house in the world—everything is perfect even to the old lady, the hostess, who capers under the jocund patronymic of "Aunt Jane." Speaking of boarding houses, how is the Test House? I would like to strike old 13 to-night with its enchanted bed. I need something of that kind now. I think of you often and of the rare old times we had, and I still nurse a hope that we may have a grand rehearsal of them again. Say to Angie that she haunts me; I saw her in a dream the other night and she had wings seven feet long and I was just going to ask her to fly some when the breakfast bell rang and

She vanished as slick
As a slight of hand trick."

As the Wizard Company moved on through western Ohio, Riley's interest in towns subsided. His want of curiosity, which distinctly characterized his mature years, seems to date from this time. When the company made ado over historical things, he remained passive. Some said he was in a trance. He was, if by trance is meant (as he wrote)

"The harvest of a quiet eye
That broods and sleeps upon the heart."

Fort Recovery, a center of maneuvers by "Mad Anthony Wayne"; Piqua, or Pickaway, the Indian

village on Mad River, the birthplace of Tecumseh; Greenville, the site of the Great Indian Treaty where "speeches were made by Red Men," the comedians told him, "that would have done honor to the civilized legislative assemblies of the world"; Sidney, Bellefontaine, Van Wert, Findlay—all were passed with provoking indifference. "He was listless and drowsy," said his friends, "as the buzzard that swung around upon the atmosphere." But when they reached Upper Sandusky he woke up. "Now," said he, "you have come to a town with history worth recording." It was hallowed ground. Charles Dickens, on his American tour, had passed that way by stage from Cincinnati to the Lakes. Riley wanted to see the old Log Inn where Dickens stayed over night, the "large, low, ghostly room in which he slept with his dressing-case full of gold, gleaned from public readings." He wanted to see the Indians with shaggy ponies that reminded the novelist of English gipsies—see where the novelist traveled in the thunder-storm at night—and the illusions in the black-stump clearings. It was too late to see the corduroy road where "the ponderous carriage fell from log to log," affording the novelist the sensation he might have in an omnibus if attempting to go to the top of a cathedral. It is good description if read with but half the interest Riley bestowed on it:—

"The stumps of trees," says Dickens, "are a curious feature in American travelling. The varying illusions they represent to the unaccustomed eye as it grows dark, are quite astonishing in their number and reality. Now there is a Grecian urn erected in the center of a lonely field; now there is a woman weeping at a tomb; now a very common-place old gentleman in white waist-coat, with thumb thrust into each armhole of his coat;

now a student poring on a book; now a crouching negro; now a horse, a dog, a cannon, an armed man; a hunch-back throwing off his cloak and stepping forth into the light. They were often entertaining to me," so the novelist continues, "as so many glasses in a magic lantern, and never took their shapes at my bidding, but seemed to force themselves upon me, whether I would or no; and strange to say, I sometimes realized in them counterparts of figures once familiar to me in pictures attached to childish books, forgotten long ago.

"It soon became dark, however. The trees were so close together that their dry branches rattled against the coach on either side, and obliged us all to keep our heads within. It lightened, too, for three whole hours; each flash being very bright, and blue and long; and as the vivid streaks came darting in among the crowded branches, and the thunder rolled gloomily above the treetops, one could scarcely help thinking that there were better neighborhoods at such a time than the thick woods.

"At length," Dickens concludes, "between ten and eleven o'clock at night, a few feeble lights appeared in the distance, and Upper Sandusky, an Indian village, where we were to stay till morning, lay before us."

Upper Sandusky afforded Riley an opportunity for the rambles of imagination. Dickens' description of the thunder-storm he enjoyed thoroughly. He could match it with a personal experience while traveling by night through an Indiana forest. The black-stump clearings with their illusions in the twilight (not the identical fields, but others like them) were there in the vicinity of Sandusky, awakening the same sensations in Riley that pleased the novelist. His heart went back to his boyhood days and his unshaken faith in fairies.

"That faith," said he, when he began to maintain a *fairy interest* in his work, "had a great deal to do in turning my mind to poetry. In my poems I have tried to get back into the spirit of those dreams. My father did not have a large library, but a choice one, and among the books were some that he forbade me to read. They were books of fairy tales and mythology. Soon as he was out of sight, however, I was again sporting with the elves and fairies. It was a wonderful world; I was charmed with it because I thought it was real. By reading the tales I developed my imagination. I saw fairies and elves everywhere. I mark this as the happiest period of my life, and I wish now that I could believe in those little sprites, and that the charm had never been dispelled. Why, I would watch a stump at a distance for hours, as Dickens did, and imagine I could see a little boy like myself running about it, and then he would disappear and I would go and pry around to find the magic stairway which led down to Pluto's realm."

While Riley grew less enthusiastic over the towns, his interest in the Wizard Company did not diminish, particularly in the proprietor. Each day he and the Doctor grew more companionable. They cracked jokes, it was said, "with the freedom of the seas." And they recalled fairy tales—one with a personal application. The Doctor was the "Puppet Showman," a traveling theater director, and his comedians the puppets whom he called before the curtain after the play and hauled from town to town in his wagon. There was the mystery about the piece of iron that fell through the spiral and became magnetic (as told in the tale). "How does it happen? Nobody knows. The spirit comes upon the iron but whence does it come? It is a miracle.

So it is with mankind. People are made to tumble through the spiral of this world, and the spirit comes upon them, and there stands a Napoleon or Luther, or a man of that kind. Men are miracles; the whole world is a series of miracles but we in our pride or ignorance call them every-day matters."

All ignorantly, seeing all as through a glass darkly, Riley was tumbling through the spiral of events in his own time as Napoleon and Luther in their time. And those events (call it miraculous if you like—Riley did), those events, uncouth, unconventional, rudimental, magnetized him with the spirit of harmony.

Thus outside the university was he being educated, not for purposes of the law or statesmanship but for flights in the realm of song. Faithful to the Muse, he was obeying impulses received from his favorite "Painters and Sculptors." The old books had lost none of their impelling power. Romney at the same age, twenty-six, was classed among the illiterate, yet knowledge he certainly had. Like him Riley was gifted with native talents, a keen eye, and a fertile imagination. The Unseen Powers were keeping him in constant touch with people and things. In short, they were passing him through "the spiral of this world." At every street corner and cross-roads he gleaned something from somebody. "There *are* no common men," he replied when blamed for association with common folks. "I take notice that Jesus sought out the so-called poor and ignorant. They were just the kind of people He wanted. They were not poor or ignorant in His sight." Like his father, Riley liked few things better than a talk with a blacksmith, carpenter or farmer—a section boss or a janitor. He found *threads of gold* in the riffraff. He never entered a cabin or traveled in a

farm wagon, never talked with a plowman, or loitered with a weaver at the loom without learning something he did not know. Like Robert Burns, whose genius he rivaled in so many ways, he "was sent into the world to see and observe; he easily compounded with any one who showed him mature nature in a different light from what he had seen before. 'The joy of his heart was to study men, their manners and their ways, and for this darling object he cheerfully sacrificed every other consideration.'"

"Riley is out making a fool of himself somewhere," said a wiseacre back in Greenfield; "it is his one accomplishment." But Riley knew what he was about when he joined himself to the Wizard Oil Company. Good companion that he was, he took from them and the people along the way more than he gave. He found opportunity to give expression to the irrepressible flow of joy in his nature. As the days passed, his soul filled with tender sensations. He was "tremblingly alive to the beauty of everything" in nature and human nature, "with faith in all that was good and enthusiasm for all that was lovely." Instead of regrets, the Riley wanderings should occasion rejoicing, for the settled and reposed man (according to Plato) knocks in vain at the gate of Poesy.

The author of "The Spirit of Poetry," college graduate though he was, did not divorce it from the wayward days of youth. Riley prolonged those days. Wherever he found hearts filled with good-will, homely humor and festive enjoyment, there he found poetry. Oftentimes it was crude but poetry nevertheless and he was always happy when he found it in obscure nooks and crevices. The stately garden, cultivated and enhanced by the hand of man, was "a thing of beauty" for a

time, but who would strip the earth of its tangled forests and the *wild* beauty of fields and woodlands? At a subsequent date in his career, recalling his Ohio days, Riley sought to give a transcript of those wanderings, emphasizing in humorous vein, the *value* of poetry. It is a prose fragment—a few names with which he disguised the “puppet showmen,”—the title and a beginning. “The scene,” he said, “was the second floor of a food joint in Ohio.” He entitled the fragment:

A Session of “THE SINGING PILGRIMS.”

MEMBERS (Mainly present)

T. L. Wilson	A. E. Sargeant
P. B. Miller	Chas. Marks
Robt. McCrea	A. Hilton
D. G. Lewis	T. Van Arden
M. W. Smith	J. O. Edgerton
J. W. Foxcroft	L. C. Graves

Scene—Back loft—“The Little DORDEMIA” All-Night Restaurant.

Time, 10 P. M.—Spread ordered for 2 A. M.

MR. LEWIS: somewhat timidly, rising from THE CHAIR and looking painfully at home in his new position as president—

Gentlemen—I—er—that is:—The gift of Song is, as you are doubtless aware, a divine gift—a sacred gift, I may say; a gift, in fact that in whomsoever’s position it may rest, I care not, a gift, I say, that should be regarded by him—or her—as a hallowed trust, at once elevating and ennobling. We who—are met thus together are, as I take it, avowedly—of ourselves, at least—disciples, and practitioners—each in his own humble degree—of this glorious art. This Glorious Art, I say, of—of Song! (A mild stimulus of applause).

Now I am not going to trespass upon time which may be much better employed in the discussion of your papers for the evening—(cries of “Go on!” and “Come off!” dubiously blended—the speaker bowing and continuing), but, giving way to your generous encouragement, I *do* want to dwell—for a brief moment at least—on Poetry and its true mission—as, I think, we should most seriously consider it. Now I am, as you know, unable, in this way, to express myself at all times as clearly as I would like—I can’t, as you know, think on my feet—

MR. VAN ARDEN: *I* could, if I had them; and *would* “think on” them—very seriously. (Laughter.)

MR. LEWIS: Yes. The gentleman might even think *with* them and find it an improvement upon his brain process. (Sensation.)

(This beginning of what the “Hoosier Wizard” failed to complete provokes a sense of something lost. One breathes a sigh of regret that it remains unfinished. Humorous literature might have had a prose sketch equal to his caricature of the educator in “The Object Lesson.”)

The crisp days of November found the Wizard Company among the upper-tributaries of the Great Miami. Although the nights were icy and the winds sometimes raw and vindictive, Riley was inclined to continue the voyage. He had regained health.

“Still on they went, and as they went,
More rough the billows grew;
And rose and fell, a greater swell,
And he was swelling, too”—

swelling in size and weight, his heart swelling with gratitude. When the Company left Greenfield, three

months before, he was called the "Little Man." Now he was not so small. The Doctor considered him a "Big Man"—but the comedians were ignorant of the Doctor's meaning. At Tippecanoe City, Thanksgiving week, they were overtaken by "Squaw Winter" and decided to return to Lima.

Although off the road, the days at Lima were not monotonous. Riley declined to help the Doctor shingle a house. "You've tried to make a great many things out of me, Doctor," said he, "but you can't make a carpenter."

"Opposed to manual labor?" asked the Doctor.

"Constitutionally."

"How about painting signs?"

"Timely suggestion; I will stain, ingrain, illuminate or bedizen—paint the town vermillion if you'll muzzle the Grand Jury."

The upshot was that Riley, once more in overalls, was set to work with a bucket of yellow paint in the laboratory. The signs were fantastic illuminations on glass, and many set afloat the virtues of Magic Oil in verse. When fancies were thick-coming he wrote them in rhyme on the wall. Then he made cartons for bottles. He started in to help the chemists prepare remedies for the coming season, but could not mix compounds. As a maker of worm lozenges he was a failure. He worked when he felt like it. He was humored to a degree that brought criticism from other workmen. If the Doctor found Riley sitting by the stove with his legs crossed and his feet higher than his head, he credited him on the books with an hour of meditation—and more verses on the wall. "As a comedian he beats them all," said the Doctor, referring to Riley's success as an entertainer on the road. His opinion of

him as an advertiser appears in the following testimonial:

C. M. TOWNSEND
Wholesale Dealer
and Proprietor of
TOWNSEND'S MAGIC OIL, WORM CANDY,
KING OF COUGHS, and HEADACHE PILLS.
No. 171 Market Street.
(Lima, Ohio.)

.
I take great pleasure in saying that James W. Riley is the most efficient Advertiser I have ever had in my employ. Throughout an engagement of four months' duration I have found him ever prompt, industrious and reliable.

C. M. TOWNSEND.

In the laboratory Riley formed an attachment for James B. Townsend, the Doctor's son, then a student of law, whom he met in October. It was a friendship at first sight. As he sat with his new friend by the kitchen stove, he became interested in Buckle's *History of Civilization*, and De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Just what relation those mighty tomes have to ballads and lyrics does not appear, but the Muse was indulgent. One afternoon while walking and talking together, the autumn leaves whirling round them, they looked seriously into their futures. Each was entering the transitional stage of his life. Each saw that he was cut out for something better. "The work they were doing was beneath them. They would quit sign-painting and working on job wagons, for occupations more worthy of their talents." They parted in December, one to become mayor of a city, receiver for a railroad, and so forth; the other, by devious paths, to rise to eminence in literature.



THE WIZARD OIL COMPANY
A crowd the week of the County Fair



DONALD GRANT MITCHELL
Editor of *Hearth and Home*

James Townsend was reared in a model American home. While in Lima, Riley was an inmate of that home. Thus he and the family were afforded the memory of a rare and genial companionship. Happily the reader has left to him a picture of those days. "Riley was a gentleman," said Mr. Townsend, "a little odd but never meaning any harm. He kept himself scrupulously clean. He had sandy-colored hair. His mustache of the same hue was long and heavy and when he played the violin it spread out and mingled with the strings. His music awakened deep feelings. What he did with his hands was done with ease and grace. He handled his feet and legs more awkwardly. I recall the peculiar 'Abe Lincoln' twist he gave his feet when he sat down and crossed them over the back of a chair. He was natural and sun-shiny, then at intervals a little sombre and sad, a perfect manifestation of nature, weaving into each day natural and simple pleasures, his face wreathed in smiles and breaking out into the most intoxicating laughter. Then again he would have long spells of silence. His gifts were marvelous—all were there, not yet wide awake. Sometimes he would read verses to my sister and laugh and blush as he confessed to their authorship. When we read books together, he would amplify and illuminate the author's meaning in a most exceptional manner. To conclude—he was a sensitive plant, wholly unconventional. He dared not give too much thought and study to the writings of others for fear that his own utterances would take on their peculiar hue. He was strictly individual. He thought best when left alone, untrammelled by the world, or others. My lament is that, owing to his timidity and modesty, his fellowmen

have not been permitted to look into the great world of prose and philosophy concealed in his heart."

When they were talking on weighty subjects in the woods, Mr. Townsend remembered that Riley stood with uncovered head, and in an eager, listening attitude. He had large, lustrous eyes—the eyes of "The Remarkable Man"—that had that dreamy far-off look, seeing what is described, though it is buried under the pyramids of Egypt.

"It is not doubted that men have a home in that place where each one has established his heart and the sum of his possessions; whence he will not depart if nothing calls him away; whence if he has departed he seems to be a wanderer, and if he returns he ceases to wander." Thus Riley had repeated the words while spinning along the highway with the Doctor, priding himself on the one thing in "Conditions from Civil Law," he could remember. He had smiled over "the sum of his possessions," and the comedians had heartily enjoyed the joke. After working a month in the laboratory he began to think seriously of home. "Greenfield," he said, "had been but a speck on the map of Retrospection—so novel had been my experience on the road. I had not made haste to return. Like a checker player, I had one fixed purpose in mind and that was to take plenty of time." But with the coming of winter days and calls from home, came also the desire to cease wandering. One of the calls was from the Sunday-school. The similarity in the illustrations of the golden text was growing monotonous. "Our blackboard," wrote a friend, "does not possess the beauty it did when it received the magic touch of your artistic fingers." The children were sighing for the illustrated "Whisper Songs" and "Lessons for Little People." In the spring

before leaving Greenfield, he had been a wizard at the blackboard. "What he did with a piece of yellow chalk and the unicorn," said a Sunday-school goer, "was to say the least unorthodox. Such flying colors! He made the blackboard look like a millinery establishment. To the children it was as good as a magic-lantern show."

An added reason for his leaving was that he had become too conspicuous in Lima for personal comfort. Of late the "Hoosier," to use his own words, "had been scrutinized by strangers as critically as a splinter in the thumb of a near-sighted man." At Lima Riley had his "seedy overcoat" improved by lining it with astrakhan. That coat, it was said, "made the farmers green with envy; it set the style for fur-lined overcoats in Allen County." The public eye becoming a little too obtrusive, Riley resolved to cross over into "the selvedge of his native state," lift his voice and hat, and shout deliverance from "the land of perpetual strangers." In the early dusk of a December evening, he stepped from the train at Union City, and after a few days with "a remarkable man" boarded the "Bob Tail Accommodation" for Hancock County.

The *Greenfield Democrat*, which had already begun what proved to be a half-century record of the poet's goings and comings, was awake as usual. For five years it had struck off Riley locals with the fidelity of a clock. December 23, 1875, it struck again: "James W. Riley arrived in the city on Friday last. He is looking fine and enjoying excellent health."

CHAPTER X

SCRIBBLING IN GRUB STREET

A POLITE city, according to Dean Swift, should have its Grub Street, a blind alley fitted up at the public expense as an apartment for the Muses. A private street, as Doctor Johnson put it, for writers of small histories, temporary poems, and inferior literary productions. Greenfield had such an alley in the seventies of the last century. According to Riley, its *assets* were a garret, a paintshop, two or three gloomy hotel rooms, a lead pencil and the "Respectfully Declined" papers of the *Début Club*. Liabilities unknown—not obtainable. He recalled that the alley was a refuge for a writer pursued by the town marshal for debt. "Often," said he, gleefully exaggerating, "I ran down an alley with an officer behind me. Beware of debt," he moaned, mimicking Horace Greeley; "he is a rich man who owes nothing and has a chance to earn his daily bread." Those insolvent days throw light on a bill bearing the date of October, 1891, from the proprietor of a hotel in Kentucky, who once was the landlord of the old Dunbar House. "Do you remember," wrote the proprietor, "the fellow who had the old Greenfield Hotel and that you dropped in sometimes to see him away back in the Hayes campaign? I find on my books a charge of \$3.40."

In 1876 the poet unable to pay for a week's lodging; in 1891, his books and his royalties running into the thousands—the author eager to pay all bills, large or

small, old or new, visible or obscure. Here is the contrast of fifteen years. Truly a typical instance of hardships in the literary field, another lesson in small beginnings.

His Grub Street effusions include embryonic things from all quarters of the sky, a "mass of metrical baubles" that were too frail and futile to last. Within a few years, like dry forest leaves, they went "flying and scurrying God knows where." Among the first was "The Poet's Realm," to which Riley subscribed himself "Edyrn," his first *nom de plume*—ten eight-line stanzas, describing a dreamland somewhere in space where the soul drifts away on the breeze like a fairy wisp of thistledown leaving the heart an empty husk "on the coast of Care and Pain." Sunbeams glanced on the walls of a palace in a garden of vines and flowers and fountains. There was the ebb and flow of music, fair ladies and lords and the rustle of scarfs and plumes, a courtly company and melody going mad at a banquet:

"Clang the harp in its wildest key,
And shatter the bugle's throat;
Fling the flags from the balcony
And the bridge across the moat:
In his goodly realm so broad and wide,
The Poet hath no fear—
Ragged, haggard and hungry-eyed
He is lord and master here."

When Riley wrote these lines he was purblind, as he himself admits in a subsequent chapter. "Not there, not there, my child," repeated the Muse; "not in distant space or in foreign lands. It has been done that way before. Your realm is here at home, right under your feet. You are to live on the coast of Care

and Pain but your heart is not to be an empty husk. You are not to sing of palaces and lords and ladies. You are to sing of log cabins, of children, of common folk in the kitchen, in the shop and at the plow."

Riley soon tired of "Edyrn" and within a year subscribed himself "Jay Whit." Some ten years elapsed before that April day in 1881, when, after writing "The Ripest Peach is Highest on the Tree," he pulled the joints out of his name, and first signed himself James Whitcomb Riley.

After "The Poet's Realm," Riley wrote "A Retrospect," in several stanzas of which he wanders back to the scenes of boyhood, back to the house where he was born, back to the swing under the locust tree, back to the schoolroom,

"And down through the woods to the swimming hole,
Where the big, white, hollow old sycamore grows."

After "A Retrospect" came "Philiper Flash," ten ten-line stanzas, which Mrs. Rhoda Millikan, who of all the Greenfield mothers had a right to know, said half was his personal experience. Riley said a third, which makes it certain that a fraction at least was biographical.

"Young Philiper Flash was a promising lad,
His intentions were good—but oh, how sad,
For a person to think
How the veriest pink
And bloom of perfection may turn out bad."

Young Flash was the son of a moral father who "shaved notes in a *barberous* way," and vauntingly prided himself on making the boy do what he was told; the pet of an excellent mother "with a martyr look,"

who loved him so tenderly she could cry when he stumped his toe.

“She stroked his hair
With such mother care
When the dear little angel learned to swear.”

The way the fast young man jingled the dollars and dimes and strewed his wealth was the talk of the land. Things went from bad to worse.

“Young Philiper Flash, on a winterish day,
Was published a bankrupt, so they say;
And as far as I know
I suppose it was so,
For matters went on in a singular way”—

in short, went to smash, and young Philiper Flash had to begin life over again.

Fortunate, indeed, said Higginson, that poets unintentionally preserve for us samples of their early crudeness,—and unfortunate indeed, added his friend, that they intentionally preserve samples of their late crudeness and offer it to the public as poetry. That we have samples of Riley’s authorship, early or late, is not directly due to any sense of value he put on them but to a clear, well-defined superstition that he must not destroy anything he wrote. He was the instrument of the Muses but it was not his function to determine values. To make a book was an affliction. He never could decide happily or conclusively what to include and what to reject. To him his poems were ventures on an uncertain sea. “How,” he once remarked, “were the sons of poverty and rhyme ever to know what to offer? The wren feeds on what the eagle overlooks.” Making a poem, he would say with Burns, was like begetting a son; you can not know whether you have a wise man

or a fool until you have given him to the world to try him.

The exception to the foregoing is the emphatic discount he put on most of his Grub Street productions covering the first five years of the seventies. That they were crude went without saying, and in the front row of these he included that "perfect wrangle of bad grammar," his first poem to find its way into print, which appeared in the Poet's Column of the *Greenfield Commercial*. "Metrical bauble" though it was, on the day of its publication he read it over and over again till the lines actually sounded musical to him. "That contribution," said he, "looked larger to me than the biggest sign I ever painted. Why, I was sure—sure, mind you—that it could be seen across the waters." Since he, in amateurish glee, read it with such fervor, perhaps the reader would like to see it:—

POET'S COLUMN

For the *Commercial*

THE SAME OLD STORY TOLD AGAIN

The same old story told again—
The maiden droops her head.
The rip'ning glow of her crimson cheek
Is answering in her stead.
The pleading tone of a trembling voice
Is telling her the way
He loved her when his heart was young
In Youth's sunshiny day.
The trembling tongue, the longing tone,
Imploringly asking why
They cannot be as happy now
As in the days gone by?
And two fond hearts, tumultuous
With overflowing joy,
Are dancing to the music
Which that dear, provoking boy

Is twanging on his bowstring,
 As, fluttering his wings,
 He sends his loved-charged arrows
 While merrily he sings:
 "Ho! ho! my dainty maiden,
 It surely cannot be
 You are thinking you are mistress
 Of your heart when it is me."
 And another gleaming arrow,
 Does the little god's behest
 And the dainty little maiden
 Falls upon her lover's breast.
 The same old story told again,
 And listened o'er and o'er,
 Will still be new, and pleasing, too,
 Till time shall be no more.

EDYRN.

Sept. 7, 1870.

Longfellow, shuddering before the windows of the *Post-Gazette* building while its walls rumbled with the jar of ink-balls and presses, waiting for his "Battle of Lovell's Pond," was not a whit more agitated than was Riley before the door of the *Commercial* office. Although the latter had seen twenty-one summers, he was as young at heart as the boy of thirteen in Portland. The desire to write the lines had been stealing over his youthful innocence for some time. After they were written came the mental strain. "The first day," said a Grub Street chum, "he was absent from dinner; the second, when nobody was looking he took the lines to the editor." The state of Riley's mind as he stood by the *Commercial* office door with the manuscript, is best related in his own words:—

"A weird atmosphere hung over the office. Strange footsteps through the hall and sounds of muffled voices fell on my half-conscious hearing. No weighty prob-

lems of finance rolled heavily along the empty corridors of thought. Down the vista of my dream the Democratic platform vanished like a ghost at daybreak. Something vague, shadowy and indefinable seemed to hang over me. As I tip-toed to the door and listened, I heard distinctly the words, 'The Editor.' What could they mean?

" 'Walk in and tackle him,' whispered an invisible monitor. I slowly turned the knob. 'Listen,' said I, 'did you not hear something shriek?'

" 'Suppose you did,' returned my monitor.—'Why do you tremble?'

" 'Perhaps he's coming out.'

" 'Let him come; you can give it to him here.'

"A chill rippled over me; I could give it to him anywhere, I thought, but he was liable to frown and kick. I was at the point, absent-mindedly, of knocking at the door when my monitor said, 'Go in without knocking; he's not coming out: go right in; beard the lion in his den'—and I went in, told the editor how I had hesitated and then sank to the floor. Five minutes later I recovered and on leaving the office, cast one look backward. He was punching and crumpling my manuscript with a blue pencil as if it were a lizard or a spider."

Just how much of the foregoing is the play of Riley's fancy the reader may determine. Learning his "poem" was to be printed, he got a proof as soon as it was set up but kept all a secret till the day of the paper's issue. The work of his pen in type for the first time—earth had no joy like that—never had had anything like it! Who "Edyrn" was, was not known for several days. When the secret leaked out, "his friends," said one of them, "rallied round him and filled his head with the usual supply of flattery and nonsense. His father's

comment was not encouraging. 'Edyrn' did not borrow a dollar, buy extra copies and mail to distant friends. Borrowing was not his forte in those days."

Riley's first experience with "poetry" antedated his "first poem in print" fifteen years. "It was while I was a small boy," said he, "that I wrote my first rhymes. They were the outcome of what seemed dire necessity to my childish mind. The children in Greenfield were in the habit of sending valentines back and forth. They were of the old-fashioned sort; the pictures were caricatures, the verses doggerel. They cost but a cent a piece but I was so small that pennies were not given me for valentines. I wanted to send them, all the same; so with some cheap crayon I sketched pictures on scrap paper as nearly like the boughten pictures as I could, only I tried to make the faces look like those I meant to send them to. After I had colored my crude figures I remembered that my valentines had no mottoes. So I made up rhymes as I went along. It was childish stuff, but it met the approval of my mother from whom I inherited my inclination for drawing. She was so pleased she let me have my own way for a week."

Above his second pen name, "Jay Whit," such "dribblings" as "Mockery," "Flames and Ashes," "A Ballad," and "Johnny," appeared in the *Indianapolis Mirror* in 1872. "The Poet's Wooing," and "Man's Devotion," (the former was rejected) were illustrated by himself, thus again exercising the gift inherited from his mother. Writing of the latter two in February to his brother John who was then living in Indianapolis he said:

"Of late I am startlingly prolific in composing. I could dispose of my productions like brick—so much per thousand.

And say, Dear brother, you will sign 'Jay Whit,'
Providing the paper will publish it.

And if they should refuse, let me down gently. I have written with a pencil to make it as plain as possible to you—don't let them see my manuscript—unless you should endeavor to publish it in an illustrated paper—you may then submit my illustration to them. Yours obscurely."

Of "A Ballad," a sea story, he wrote his brother in May as follows:

"If you can't get this on the front page, don't put it in, for I consider it the best thing I have ever written and I want to see it occupy a front seat—or we'll let it stand till one can be procured.

"Try it for this week—And feel them a little on a prose sketch—for instance (do it this way): 'He has written some sketches that I consider good—not tiresome and so forth—but racy—original—with now and then a little spice of poetry—humor—wit—and quite pathetic occasionally—and so forth'—understand? Try it and send me the result.

"Use your best endeavors to send it to the editor this week. If published, I expect there will be some one from Greenfield (referring to his brother) who would like to hand his name down to posterity by having it said that he once brought me from the renovator's, a second-hand coat—when I was too poor to even thank him for his trouble. (Exit laughing.)"

"Johnny," a story of three thousand words, was the first sketch to appear in print. The plot is so simple a child could remember it. The scene is a country town with its surplus of village gossip, barking dogs, and dinner bells. There is the meeting of a bachelor and a widow in

her mourning weeds on an April evening, a fire at midnight and the rescue of the widow's boy from a burning roof by the bachelor—and then in swift succession the courtship and the marriage. The story was "racy and original" as its author wrote when seeking to have it printed in the county paper, but "dull and tiresome" when he grew older and consigned it to the waste basket.

In 1873, as we have seen, the Argonaut was away from Greenfield with the "Graphics." In the spring and summer of 1874, he sent "Private Theatricals," "At Last," "The Poet's Wooing," "My Jolly Friend's Secret," "Plain Sermons," "A Summer's Afternoon," and "That Little Dorg" to the *Danbury News*. All were accepted as the effusions of a "rising litterateur." They lacked the spontaneous felicity of after years but were evidence of merit nevertheless. News of their acceptance came to him "like a shower to a fainting strawberry." Montgomery Bailey and his "Danbury News Man" were popular in Greenfield as elsewhere. The incessant flow of humor from his pen had quickened Riley's sense of drollery for some time, and the editor in turn caught gleams of funny things in "Jay Whit." Of course the contributions were free. It was honor enough to have them accepted. Here was something new. Riley had crossed the Hudson. He had penetrated the Icy East:

"What were his feelings as grave and alone,
He sat in the silence, glaring in the grate
That stewed and sighed on in an undertone
As subtle—immovable as fate?"

What were his feelings? Too numerous and unknowable for consideration here. But one thing was settled—settled at that very early date. Hungry as he was

for eastern recognition, he would not be absorbed by it. "Whenever a writer west of the Alleghany Mountains," said he, "has risen to eminence, the East has absorbed him with greedy haste. By this process his genius loses the tang of its native region, the flavor of the soil from which he sprung, and the soil loses the talent it nurtured and on which it had a claim."

In February, 1874, "Farmer Whipple—Bachelor" was printed in the *Greenfield News*, and in December, "Tradin' Joe" appeared. Both poems were written without thought of publication. Their author tucked them away in his "reticule" for recitation in school-houses and on his country excursions. "Farmer Whipple" was one of the popular numbers recited from the steps of the Wizard Oil wagon.

"In those days," said Riley, "I had a 'dramatic' friend who was on the rocks as often as I was. When I was begging for bread the idea invariably struck him that I could in some way, unknown to fortune, make ends meet, and promote his schemes however gigantic or unattainable they were." A letter from the friend came from Pendleton in February, 1874. "I have a desire," he wrote, "to go into partnership with you. An idea has just struck me. Perhaps we could buy out the editor who publishes the paper here. I think we could make money out of it. You are a good writer, and would then have something to do. We could save our money and then go into a dramatic company together. I mean engage one of our own. If you are willing to be steady and work and save and try, come over and see me and find out if the editor will sell and at what price. The reason I write the above is that I learn that you now have nothing to do" (and so forth). The letter set "Jay Whit" considering seriously the

newspaper field, as did also a postal card from his Graphic Chum referring to a prospect of employment on the *Kokomo Republican*, which (in the chum's opinion) the Hoosier Humorist could make a better paper than the *Danbury News*. Late in the year he applied for work at the office of the *Greenfield News*. The editor was not able to pay for work. "Sorely as I need it," said the applicant, "it is not money I want but experience." Next week the *News* appeared with:

W. T. Walker, Editor

J. W. Riley, Associate Editor.

"We now have in our office," (so wrote the Associate Editor, though the *News*' readers imputed the pleasantry to the Editor)—"a red-headed devil who loses his hair occasionally by spontaneous combustion. He wears a tiny hat and never considers himself in full dress without a Babcock fire extinguisher on his back. In times past he has contributed to the *News* under the *nom de plume* of 'Jay Whit.' Now as local editor he will doubtless infuse into its columns the spell of his sobriquet without the *h*. To say that this new member of our staff will make the local columns hum would be placing it mild. Many of his friends think he has struck his proper gait and will develop into a great editor."

It was the Associate Editor's province to collect items from townspeople and countrymen and "embellish them for publication." Then it was that the "apprentice-poet of the town, rising to impassioned heights" began

"To lighten all the empty, aching miles
Around with brighter fancies, hopes and smiles."

He threw in with the Hominy Ridge items local advertising rhymes such as:

“Carpets coarse and carpets fine,
Rich in color and design,
Sold at bargains half divine”—
(with name of business firm attached.)

“Has anybody heard of a cure for window panes?” he asked. An old lady sent full instructions for a liver pad. He did not know about that, “but a half section of number one strawberry shortcake makes a stomach pad that has few equals and no superior.”

To his little comrade in the street: “Now the small boy busies himself collecting pennies for the circus,” ran a local, “but he will probably crawl under the canvas as heretofore. May he have his usual good luck.”

Nor did the local editor neglect his rural neighbors:

“The farmer works his hired hand
From four o’clock in the morning light
Till eight or nine o’clock at night,
And then finds fault with his appetite.”

After this he would go after them for delinquent subscriptions: “The last twenty-five sticks of an editor’s woodpile vanish before his eyes like the morning dew.” When items were scarce, in corn-planting time, for instance, he “would go out and look over the Poor Farm and come back with a basketful of abuse, neglect and so on.”

It goes without saying that the Associate Editor supplied the *News* liberally with effusions of a literary character. There were such fledglings in verse as “Leloine” (a faint imitation of Poe), “An Autumn Leaf,” and “The Ancient Printerman.” The paper

almost staggered under the weight of "Babe McDowell," the story of a college student falling in love with a beautiful girl who was training for the stage. "My first story to require serial publication," remarked Riley. "Length was its sole merit."

In the spring of 1875 he made another bid for eastern recognition. Purchasing a sample copy of *Hearth and Home* at a news-stand, he concluded to try his luck with the doughty "Ik Marvel," who had charmed him with *Reveries of a Bachelor*. He sent him "A Destiny," which twenty years later was given the title "The Dreamer" in *A Child-World*—"the poem about a long-haired young man," as Riley expressed it, "who associated much with himself, took to solitude, and walked alone in the woods." It was published April tenth with three quaint illustrations; the first, the strange young man without companions, his hat and book on the ground in the shade of a majestic tree, the dreamer

"Lying limp, with upturned gaze,
Idly dreaming away his days":

the second and third, the farmer at the pasture bars, who saw the fragment of legal cap paper with the summer rhyme thereon, which he chased to the thicket of trees, and there discovered that its author was not a poet but the inventor of a churra.

When Riley received the issue of *Hearth and Home* containing his poem and a letter commending his verse, together with a draft for eight dollars, he "proceeded" (to quote his own words) "to build a full-sized air castle. At last he had struck the trail to fortune. He walked in the clouds"—and likewise walked down to the Green-

field Banking Company to cash the draft—the first he had ever received for a poem. He was rich—rich as the parson with forty pounds a year. Louisa May Alcott did not have fairer visions of fortune when she sold her first story to the newspaper for five dollars. Several days it was humorously whispered round town that “Jay Whit,” after waiting so long and so patiently, would now be able “to liquidate his debts.” Alas, for the wide gulf between them and the size of the draft. “He paid no debts,” said a Greenfield chum; “it was a red letter day; we stood on our heads for joy and lived like nabobs while the money lasted.” But the game was yet by no means in his own hands. Just when the Associate Editor was making a name for himself and colors were flying, the *News* was sold, its name changed to *Republican* and his dreams shattered. The paper went from bad to worse and soon joined the great majority. “I strangled the little thing,” said Riley. “Then I continued to grind out poetry for ‘literary departments.’ I more than supplied the foreign demand with plenty left over for home use. When I sent an editor a prose sketch he advised me to try poetry. I did so and scribbled away at the rate of 2:40 a ream. Then he advised me to try prose again. This was too much. Pursuing the tenor of my own way, I had my hair cut, painted a sign or two and played the guitar.” Throughout his Grub Street experience he had always a meager income from his trade. When other ventures failed he could paint a sign. To this end he vibrated between Greenfield and Anderson.

While he was thus lingering along in doubt, he was handed the following circular from the Western Union Telegraph Company, then located in the old Blackford Block, corner Washington and Meridian, Indianapolis:

Dear Sir:

Will you please keep me advised promptly by telegraph, of all important news transpiring in your vicinity, such as homicides, suicides, accidents, and matters of moment that may be exciting the public attention. I will pay at the rate of fifty cents a special, settlement to be made at the end of each month. *Make the special short as possible.* By doing this you will greatly oblige

Yours truly,

R. T. HOWARD,
Manager of Specials.

"I proceeded," said Riley, "to build another air castle. I recalled a valuable list of fires, suicides and accidents in the past. Remittance for press telegrams would buy shoes and bread. But, strange to relate, not a lax, shabby, villainous thing happened the whole summer. Monotony was a drug on the market. They had lynched the negro the week before the circular came. There were weeks of waiting. I grew ill. The while I tried to study law—and if wading through that deplorable stuff (he was quoting from *Bleak House*), if charging down the middle and up again, if going through that country dance of costs and fees and corruption will not make a man sick, nothing else will. The humdrum days continuing, I proceeded to make a little excitement of my own. A traveling showman passing by, I climbed on the wagon and shed the town."

Returning from that "rather lengthy sojourn in the Buckeye State" (with the Wizard Oil Company), he immediately ascended the stairs to the old room in the Dunbar House, which not only sheltered the Grub Street tenant, but had the honor of being the first "literary den" in the town. Up there in room 13 (his superstition about the number was not yet a trouble-

some factor), up there he spun political jingles for the Hayes and Wheeler campaign; up there he had written "The Dreamer," and one cold January night while his room-mate sighed over the waste of coal oil he rose from his bed and saved some fragments which he tied together the next day for "My Fiddle." Up there he was wont to "switch the bow and lean back and laugh and wink at every rainy day"; up there

"They tell me, when he used to plink
And plonk and plunk and play,
His music seemed to have the kink
Of driving cares away."

While occupying "old 13" he sent a "bulky envelope," a second sample of his "fancy work," to *Hearth and Home*. The venture was disastrous. "By the time my effusions reached them," said Riley, "the hand of Fate had closed the institution like a telescope." The verse came back but the sting was taken away somewhat by the letter from Donald G. Mitchell:

THE GRAPHIC COMPANY

The Daily Graphic
\$12 Per Year

Hearth and Home
\$2.50 Per Year

New York, February 18, 1876.

Mr. J. W. Riley,
Dear Sir:

The sudden decision of the Graphic Managers to discontinue the publication of *Hearth and Home* forthwith, compels the return of the accompanying very graceful poem, which I should otherwise publish with pleasure.

Trusting that you may not be discouraged from further exercise of your literary talent through a more fortunate medium, I remain,

Yours respectfully,

the Ex Editor of "H. & H."

The "very graceful poem" was "A Country Pathway," which he had written on the banks of Lick Creek in Madison County, where he was visiting friends for a week at an old-fashioned homestead. One day, after whiling a few hours with wheat thrashers three miles from the homestead, he returned across the fields. At one point he followed a path overhung with willow boughs. "It was a darling pathway," he said, recalling the afternoon walk; "I yearned for something to dispel the mist from my future. What would I not give to know that my path of life would lead on through scenes of enchantments and up to the door of a smiling world as my country pathway led me through the valley, and across the orchard to the door of smiling friends."

To the "disastrous venture" in *Hearth and Home*, lovers of Riley verse are largely indebted for "The Shower." There was in connection therewith a touch of rustic beauty and purity in a "British Book" which he recalled with lively pleasure. "A rainbow in the sky, the glittering of the rain upon the leaves; the dripping poultry under the hedge; the reflection of the cattle on the road, and the girl with her gown over her shoulders,"—a picture which placed James Burnet in the first rank as a pastoral painter; and it is equally true that "The Shower" and after it "The Sudden Shower" placed Riley in the front rank of lyric poets.

On receiving the *Hearth and Home* letter, Riley was more interested in "Ik Marvel" than ever. One day he ran across "A Picture of Rain." "Will anyone," asked Mitchell, "give us on canvas, a good, rattling, saucy shower? There is room in it for a

rare handling of the brush:—the vague, indistinguishable line of the hills,—the gray lines, slanted by the wind and trending eagerly downward,—the swift petulant dash into the little pools, making fairy bubbles that break as soon as they form,—the land smoking with excess of moisture,—and the pelted leaves all wincing and shining and adrip.”

“Why don’t *you* try it?” asked his Graphic Chum.

“You might as well ask the clouds to rain,” answered Riley. However the query did set him thinking and in due time

“The cloud above put on its blackest frown,
And then, as with a vengeful cry of pain,
The lightning snatched it, ripped and flung it down
In ravelled shreds of rain:

“While he, transfigured by some wondrous art,
Bowed with the thirsty lilies to the sod,
His empty soul brimmed over, and his heart
Drenched with the love of God.”

CHAPTER XI

THE STRANGE YOUNG MAN

DO YOU know Whitcomb Riley?"

"Whit Riley?—oh, yes, I know him and his folks well. People round these parts don't think much of him. He is sort o' flighty and no good."

Such was the answer a newspaper correspondent received from an old lady, a resident of Greenfield, who like some of her neighbors had less faith in Riley's future than those who looked on from a distance. She had seen many human riddles in the Carolinas where she once lived, but none, she was quite certain, so mysterious as "that young Riley," none who played at cross purposes so abstrusely. "Just when he seems to be getting a start at sign-painting or the law," said another neighbor, "he flies the track and over the hills he goes." While collecting items for the *Greenfield News*, he would be unaccountably seized with a desire to write verse, and so he would hie away "to Fortville or down to Fountaintown, where," he said, "I rented a dingy upstairs room for ten cents a week, and locked the door." Thus he avoided the look of idle curiosity that often confronted him around the Greenfield post-office. Too often for his comfort "the wondering eyes of the curious rabble" were fastened on box 15, his letter box, with its pamphlets, papers, and magazines, and the numerous letters with mysterious postmarks, ever crowding into it. To old-timers his withdrawal from society was past comprehension.

Usually, they observed, folks were happy when they were the center of attraction. Not so with Riley. During those intervals of absence from home (to borrow the "corduroy" lines) :

"He lingered and delayed,
And kept his friends away ;
Shut himself within his room and stayed
A-writing there from day to day ;
He kept a-getting stranger still,
And thinner all the time,
You know, as any fellow will,
On nothing else but rhyme."

"And when after a two weeks' vigil he returned," said one of his comrades, "he was still the pale, sad-eyed subject of bewilderment, the problem Fate alone could decipher. He had dreams that he himself but half understood and of course none of his friends understood." He was the man he describes in "Fame," who drew

"A gloom about him like a cloak,
And wandered aimlessly. The few
Who spoke of him at all, but spoke
Disparagingly of a mind
The Fates had faultily designed:
Too indolent for modern times—
Too fanciful and full of whims—
For, talking to himself in rhymes,
And scrawling never-heard-of hymns,
The idle life to which he clung
Was worthless as the songs he sung!"

The "strange young man" was not always melancholy. There were days, sometimes weeks, when he was a perfect battery of merriment. He was a droll, ridiculous genius, the gifted, good-for-nothing Bob

he portrays in the "Gilded Roll"—laughing always at everything.

"How sad he seemed in his wild delight,
And how tickled indeed when he wept outright;
What a comical man when he writhed in pain,
And how grieved he was to be glad again."

On rare occasions when he and his companions were hilarious in the old-time charades, he

"Went round in a coat of pale pink-blue,
And a snow-white vest of crimson hue,
And trousers purple, and gaiters gray—
All cut, as the French or Dutch would say,
La—macht nichts aus, oder—décolleté."

Friends declared that he was in almost all respects the Mr. Clickwad of the "Respectfully Declined Papers of the Buzz Club," a fictitious series of opinions, ghastly dreams, impromptu rhymes and literary frivolities, that he wrote a few years later for the *Indianapolis Saturday Herald*. Often Mr. Clickwad seemed totally oblivious of his surroundings. He would stare blankly at the ragged gas-jet, drumming his pencil against his teeth. Then he would transfer his attention to a mangy manuscript, erase a word here and there, and drop into "a comatose condition of mentality" that, to lively companions, was aggravating in the extreme. Mr. Clickwad was calmly accepted as a bundle of contradictions. His faculty for pleasing and horrifying in the same breath was simply marvelous, the informalities of his fancy "being beyond cavil the most diabolic and delightful on record."

"Notwithstanding his eccentricities," remarked a shrewd Greenfield attorney, "Riley does know the Great Nine. How he came to know them baffles inquiry, but he certainly does enjoy the honor of their friendship."

With what excess of feeling is shown in a brief message to Lee O. Harris. He had "a few moments," he said, "to lavish in a dissipation of thought." Signing himself "Troubled Tom," he sends his Schoolmaster a postal card to say, "I have been thinking of you all day and wondering whether the Muse is on good terms with *you* this misty weather. I have had a *perfect night-mare of fine frenzy*." Another time he tried to express his *frenzy* in verse:

"O he was a poet weird and sad,
And life and love betimes went mad;
He sang such songs as flame and flare
Over the wide world everywhere.
Famous was he for his wan wild eyes,
And his woeful mien and his heaving sighs."

Though wild and eccentric, though his lips were pale
beneath the lamplight,

"He sang and the lark was hushed and mute,
And the dry-goods clerk forgot his flute;
And the night operator at the telegraph stand
Smothered his harp in his trembling hand;
The dull and languid as they read his song,
Sighed all day and the whole night long
For a love like his and the passion warm
As the pulsing heart of the thunder-storm."

At another time, while visiting his Schoolmaster, "Troubled Tom" easily convinced him that genius is a form of insanity, particularly poetic genius. Both agreed that there was eminent authority for the conclusion. Shakespeare had said that the lunatic, the lover, and the poet were of imagination all compact. The Schoolmaster went on to explain that men of genius in all ages were men of strong passions. Riley added that they were necessarily eccentric, and could

not by dint of any virtue travel the conventional road. Men of average talent touched life on a few sides only. The creative spirit was not in them. Hence they regarded with suspicion a man of genius who touched life on many sides. Riley had noted in a "British Book" that men dull in comprehending the eccentricities of a great painter, set down what surpassed their own understanding to the account of the painter's stupidity. The Schoolmaster was of the persuasion that genius is little in little things. "The mistake the people make," he said, "is to attribute littleness to genius in *all* things." Riley complained that the people lacked impartiality of vision. Everybody in his own degree, was drugged with his own frenzy. Why deny the luxury to the poet? It was a matter of gradation. The poet's frenzy was higher on the scale.

Lunatic, wise man, or poet, "Troubled Tom" had his defenders. By no means were "everything and everybody against him," as he once moaned when in a melancholy mood. Young people were for him and occasionally his elders. His near neighbor, Judge Gooding, defended him as brave Sam Johnson vindicated Sheridan and substantially in the same language: "There is to be sure something in the fellow," said the Judge, "to reprehend and something to laugh at; but Sir, he is not a foolish man. No, Sir; divide mankind into wise and foolish, and he stands considerably within the ranks of the wise."

When faultfinders were numerous there was one home where Riley never failed to find encouragement. Mother Millikan, the first to forecast his literary future, had no misgivings. From that day in his teens he crossed the threshold to find the *Sketch Book* on her center table, her home had been a refuge from

dejection. Her daughter, Nellie Millikan, was uniformly friendly and helpful. According to the aphorism, "those who befriend genius when it is struggling for distinction, befriend the world." Such credit belongs to the Millikans. Though the daughter married and moved to another state, her faith and interest in Riley never diminished. Her husband, George Cooley, was equally loyal. "You have a talent," he wrote from his new home in Illinois, "that is sure to meet with just reward. Go on, my boy. I only wish it were in my power to point you to a shorter and easier road to fame than that you have been compelled to travel. My word for it, the time will come when it will not be Whit Riley but James W. Riley, Esquire, one of America's famous poets."

"Dear James," Mrs. Cooley wrote in the same letter, "you have no one left in Greenfield who takes the same interest in you that I did or who is so proud of you when people write me that you 'are going to the dogs.' How will they feel when the time comes that all who know you will be so proud to take you by the hand? The world is before you. You are standing well up on the ladder. Grip it with a firm hand, be determined to reach the top. You are young, almost a boy. Take good care of your health. Do not let the late hours that bring only an aching head the next day, steal away your youthful strength and rob you of your brightest thoughts. Keep them to give to the world. God bless you."

As Riley grew in years and experience he had a great deal to say about the well-meant intentions of friends that were more harmful than helpful. In rhyme he expressed himself this way:

“Neglected genius—truth be said—
As wild and quick as tinder,
The more you seek to help ahead
The more you seem to hinder.”

The encouragement Nellie Millikan gave him disproved the allegation. She did not chronicle absurdities. She did not forget what was noble and excellent in a man. She saw that “God twists and wrenches our evil to our good.” She saw merit in Riley’s irregular, impassioned force. Others urged him to paint signs on country barns. She urged him to stick to his lead pencil. The fidelity of her friendship has seldom been equaled. She admonished her “Troubled Tom” to trust to his heart and to what the world calls illusions.

His reply to a letter from her was characteristic of him at that time. As usual he indulged in idle rhymes.

“You want a letter
And I’ve not a line of prose—
Wouldn’t ‘jingle’ answer better?
I have plenty, Gracious knows!
For my mind is running riot
With the music of the Muse.”

There was a dearth of glad hearts and no sweet voice to quiet “the restless pulse of care.” The “old crowd” was widely scattered. The ties of friendship were tattered and raveled at the ends, and the social circle was dimmer

“Than a rainy afternoon,
And sheds a thinner glimmer
Than the ring around the moon.”

The past was like a story to which he had listened in a dream, he went on in a metrical moan. It was vanishing in the glory of the early morning. Glancing at his shadow he felt the loss of strength while the Day of

Life was advancing. The flight of time gave him scarcely a moment "to trip it with a rhyme." Nevertheless he really did believe his "fame was growing stronger";

"And though he fell below it,
He might know as much of mirth,
To live and die a poet
Of unacknowledged worth;
For Fame is but a vagrant,
Though a loyal one and brave,
And her laurels ne'er so fragrant
As when scattered o'er the grave."

A friend once remarked that "Riley is one of those men who appear to be born what they are by some accident of nature." Riley was different. To begin with, he refused to be born "according to the tradition of the register books." Following a youthful fancy, he made a little memoir of himself and changed the year of his birth from 1849 to 1853, adopting the whim of Henry Fuseli, the eccentric painter, who changed his birth year from 1741 to 1745. At first a mere freak, it became in later years a matter of serious consideration when he grew sensitive on the question of his age. The freak was a source of confusion to his friends. They wrote for the facts:

"Mr. James W. Riley, the man of great mirth,
Give us the day and the date of your birth;
We are anxious to know when you came to this earth,
Of the heavenly planets and the zodiac's girth."

He dodged the planets, humored his whim and returned an evasive answer.

He was different. When a boy he refused to be put through the straight jacket system of education. Whenever that system gave scope to his individuality

—all too seldom he thought for his advancement—he was its willing votary. But when it addressed him exactly in the same manner and with the same standards it addressed other boys, his heart organized an insurrection. In the Shoe-Shop he was warned of the danger of reducing education to “the careless, fitful spirit of a gamester who felt that he was a part of a great gaming system.” He once remarked of a little flock of visitors, “I can not endure them; they are all alike—all of one order—one habit of thought. I feel like a wildcat among them.” “I can remember,” he said when grown to maturity, “when I, through some strange hallucination that victimized me for a season, had a desire to be just like everybody else. I was afraid somebody would think I was peculiar. I lived down in a little country village and was ashamed to let folks know I lived there. I did not fool anybody. Everybody knew that I was from Greenfield. If I were a countryman and had lived on an eighty-acre farm all my life and had never been off it, I would brag about that farm. I would swear it was the most beautiful piece of property under the light of heaven. If men doubted it I would tell them to live a lifetime on just such a farm and then they would know.”

He was different. At a “skating bee” on the Mississinewa River, while the tide of glee slid merrily on, he sat on the bank, all alone. Skaters came to him with their zestful song:

“O come with us and we will go
And try the winter’s cold, sir;
Nor fear the ice, nor fear the snow,
For we are tough and bold, sir.”

In vain. He preferred the company of his own thoughts. “Think of it,” Bill Nye remarked at a

later period, "there he was, just a sliver in the great wood-pile of creation, yet fancying he heard music from the breakers far away on the restless, rising sea of ambition."

He was different—unfit for the confusion of the world yet having an intimate knowledge of it. He knew things by intuition. "Speaking of intuitions," he said in an interview of his later years, giving a portrait of himself, "I knew a fellow back in my native town. His name—well, he had a law office with a bay-window on the second floor of a building on Main Street. He was a quiet chap; he used to have intuitions and premonitions and all that sort of thing; he had quite a reputation for them. Time and again when he saw a stranger crossing the street, he would tell exactly to what building and to what office he was going,—and his forecast was usually correct.

"Well, he was sitting in his window one day *meditating*, like Mark Twain's frog, when he noticed a crowd of loafers gathering in front of a building across the way. They began to gaze dreamily up at a man on a stepladder, who, with his back to them, was swinging up a shop sign. They all stood there, quiet and silent, with their hands behind their backs when he remarked to the men in his office that he could cause a stir among the dreamers, yet he would not say anything or do anything other than go over among them for a moment. Then he put himself under his hat, stuffed his hands in his pockets, went down-stairs, crossed the street and lazily slipped in among the gazers. No one moved, no one noticed him; every one seemed to be in a trance. After a minute he began softly to whistle an old familiar hymn, 'Shall We Gather at the River.' He stopped at the end of the second line. A man behind him un-

consciously took up the tune and carried it along and then another caught on, and another, and soon the whole crowd was whistling softly or half humming the melody—the inoculator in the meantime returning to his law office. By and by the man with the sign started to join in unconsciously, but for some reason could not quite catch the thread of the tune. That took his mind off his work, and since his work at that moment consisted in balancing the heavy sign on one nail and himself on one foot, the result was speedy demoralization. The sign tumbled down, he narrowly escaped death, besides damaging the eye of a spectator.”

Here, in a trivial incident of the street, is a glimpse of Riley’s power over the hearts of men. “How did you do that, James?” asked his associates in the office. James did not know. It was a mystery, just as years afterward his power over an audience was a mystery. Nevertheless “the spells of persuasion, the keys of power” were put into his hands. He was so

“Self-centered, that when he launched the magic word, It shook or captivated all who heard.”

“Robert Collyer,” said an Indiana clergyman, “can find abundance of material in Greenfield for his lecture on ‘Blunders of Genius.’” The remark was occasioned by Riley’s declining to quit his “literary den” to attend a revival. He was different. He stood alone and thus provoked a sharp criticism from the evangelist, but he fared no better and no worse, it seems, than young Professor Longfellow, whose failure to attend a “protracted meeting” met with similar disapproval. “I struck my critic,” said Riley, “in the small of the back with a large chunk of silence. I had my pulpit and Brother Doe had his.”

It may be said here parenthetically, that quite early in his career Riley reached the conclusion that a man's greatness did not consist in believing a thing because it was popular. Ofttimes, as he saw it, it was his duty to stand for a thing when "all the cry of voices was on the other side." Soon after he reached his majority, he found a paragraph in *Hearth and Home*, an editorial note by Ik Marvel, which served him as a standard of living almost two score and ten years. "A man's true greatness," wrote Marvel, "lies in the consciousness of an honest purpose through life, founded on a just estimate of himself and everything else, on frequent self-examination, and a steady obedience to the rule which he knows to be right, without troubling himself about what others may think or say, or whether they do or do not do that which he thinks and says and does."

"Troubled Tom" was such a strange young man. The more abstruse his lines, the more certainly he characterized himself:

"He would chant of the golden wheat
And then trill a biscuit-song as sweet
As poets ever know.
Then write a rhyme on theme sublime,
And then twirl his pen as of yore
And write a lay in his wildest way
Of a rival grocery store."

He unraveled wild and wanton fantasies from most improbable sources. "They were designed," he wrote,

"By cunning of the spider brain—
A tangle-work of tissue, wrought
And woven, in an hour of pain,
To trap the giddy flies of thought."

The image of himself doing strange things in uncom-

mon places was startling. Sometimes he was a truant schoolboy with a paper kite in the sky, "unwinding syllables of gossamer in glimmering threads of speech, and leaving at their ends shadowy thoughts that lost themselves in the fleecy clouds." Sometimes he was a cast-away "unlocking captive lays from the dungeon of his dismal heart that

Would make the world turn wonderingly around,
And slake its thirsty ear with harmony."

Sometimes he was a desolate dwarf on the coast of a flying island,

"Where only remorse in pent agony lives
To dread the advice that his grandmother gives."

Such a strange young man. He wanted to idle away weeks and write in some obscure hotel room, or in the shade of the Brandywine elms, but such a boon the Fates denied him. "It was not like Hamlet," he said, "just a debate in my mind what to do. I literally had to take up arms against a sea of troubles. I had to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." The arrows were often nothing more than a confusion of ideas concerning the properties, but the confusion was an affliction to him, and it turned out—a plague for life. His clothes were not cut in the latest style. Women thought he should be at their command. He should while away the rosy hours in amusement. He should talk sentiment. Not at all, thought he. So he set about doing unaccountable things. He discounted the moon; he forgot to play; he worked at night and slept in the morning. Unwilling to countenance his infringements of custom, his companions soon gave him up as an incorrigible.

To add to his discomfort, he lost control of his temper, when some defiance of his wishes seemed to justify anger, and frequently (as he discovered on reflection) when there was no possible justification. "The extra lemon," said his friend, Myron Reed, "that had been squeezed into the nectar of his disposition damaged its flavor."

He would pick up slips of paper in stores or offices to keep in his pocket for lead pencil memoranda. He made notes while other men *worked* and thus was frequently pointed out as a loungeur. When the days were long he sought sequestered places in the thickets and fallen tree-tops, and he once remained hidden away in the woods in spite of the on-coming rain.

"In those rare odd times, in his better moods
Some rustic verses to him were born,
That would live, perchance, in their native woods,
As long as the crows that pull the corn."

As the days went by, a lowering shroud of dreams enfolded him. There were complaints instead of rejoicing, and "one dismal evening," (he wrote in the gloom) "when the grimy hand of dusk was wiping out the day with spongy clouds, he let the fire die out in his room and refused to light the lamp, declaring that the burden was heavier than he could bear." What, he wondered, was to keep his heart warm when friends deserted him, when birds declined to sing, when difficulty seemed a mountain and success a foothill, when he sat in silence and gazed at the sky through the window "like one who hears it rain"?

"Many men," he remarked half-seriously a decade after his dismal experience, "live in a community for years and years, carefully concealing the latent poetry in their hearts, and pass for reputable citizens; but it



THE SIGN ON THE COUNTRY BARN
Painted by Riley in 1873



NEW YORK STORE SIGN AT ANDERSON

The winds came, and the rain fell;
 The gusty panic blew—
 It mattered not—the L. M. Trees
 But strong and stronger grew

was my fate by an unfortunate current of events very early in my career to be betrayed and branded as a poet."

In that period of heart-heaviness he was seeking a friendship that would deeply share his joys and sorrows. He would compass the miracle of true affection. He had a surplus of *professional* friends whose oblique remonstrations "were deeper injuries than the downright blows of an enemy." Where was the man who would lay down his life, if it be necessary, for his friend? The heroic example of Damon and Pythias was largely fiction. It should be *truth*, he thought, the common behavior of mankind. He was seeking the Thousandth Man—

"The Thousandth Man will stand your friend
With the whole round world ag'in you."

You can show *him* your feelings. He will bide the shame of mockery and laughter. He will stick closer to you than a brother. Riley's hunger for friendship was the same unsatisfied longing he once attributed to the heart of a woman:

"Where art thou, Love, still lost to me
In unknown deeps of destiny?
Thou man of men the fates design
For me! I reach my hands for thine
Across the darkness, and I moan
My love out all alone—alone.

"But yesterday one blithe of tongue,
An heir of fortune, fair and young,
Walked with me down the gleaming sands,
And of a sudden caught my hands
And held them, saying 'All mine own!'
And yet alone—alone—I walked alone."

He was not only a strange *young* man but he was a strange middle-aged man and a strange old man (if it may be said he grew old). There was another Riley back of the visible one which nobody ever saw; associates saw the smiling face or the "iron mask," but no one ever saw "the light behind the brow." "Away inside of the internal man," said he, "is another man and that man is so superior to the inferior one in front of him that he shades his eyes with his arm to hide the blush and shame. The altitude of the superior man is so great that the inferior can not reach high enough to touch him."

To Riley's way of thinking, friendship was as inexplicable as poetry. Efforts to explain it were futile. From Cicero to Emerson it was largely a matter of speculation. Who could write the history of *love*?—and friendship without love was as barren as the coast of Enderby Land. A passage attributed to Gail Hamilton expressed his view with accuracy sufficient for quotation. "There is no such thing," says she, "as knowing a man intimately. Every soul is, for the greater part of its mortal life, isolated from every other. Whether it dwells in the Garden of Eden or the Desert of Sahara, it dwells alone. Not only do we jostle against the street-crowd unknowing and unknown, but we go out and come in, we lie down and rise up, with Strangers. Jupiter and Neptune sweep the heavens not more unfamiliar to us than the worlds that circle our hearthstone. Day after day, and year after year, a person moves by our side; he sits at the same table; he reads the same books; he kneels in the same church. We speak to him; his soul comes out into the vestibule to answer us, and returns—and the gates are

shut; therein we can not enter. We were discussing the state of the country; but when we ceased, he opened a postern gate, went down a bank, and launched on a sea over whose waters we have no boat to sail, no star to guide."

CHAPTER XII

IN THE DARK

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, the son of Harvard and intellectual Cambridge and Boston, could say with royal grace that no man is born into the world whose work is not born with him; that there is always work and tools to work withal, for those who will. But with Whitcomb Riley it was different. His work was born with him, but the tools were not always in sight, and when seen were often unavailable. Like Robert Burns he had "materials to discover; the metal he worked in lay hid in a wilderness," where few if any before him "guessed its existence. He found himself in deep obscurity, without instruction, without model." Until his twenty-seventh year he was "a man wandering in the dark," waging a continual war with Fortune, and groping his way by the aid of a wandering rather than a fixed star. His genius was little more than "the capacity for receiving discipline."

It always distressed him that vast numbers of people were unhappy in their occupations. He deplored the vain endeavor of men and women to be what nature never intended, "groping, floundering," he once crudely expressed it, "going round and round and round, never getting any sand on the track."

He knew of no reason why men should not "sing at their work as merrily as a flock of robins in a cherry tree at sunrise." He was persuaded that each man has

an unquestionable right to an unquestionable place, "an aptitude born with him to do easily some feat impossible to any other. Blessed is the right man in the right place." Do but the tenth part of what you *can* do, said the old "British Book," and fame and fortune will be the result.

"The camel's hump is an ugly hump,
Which well you may see at the Zoo;
But uglier yet is the hump we get
From having too little to do"—

not having the right thing to do, added Riley so emphatically that Kipling most likely would have gladly made the change.

While riding one day in the "Buckeye" with the "Standard Remedy" vender, Riley came to a blacksmith shop, with a smoky sign above the door: *Come In And See Me Work*. What he found, on entering the shop, was truly a revelation—a man unspeakably happy because he had found his place. Farmers loved to hear his bellows blow. Pedlers and children laughed and talked with him as they passed. He was a poet, too. "The smoke from the forge," said he, "is wild ivy. See it creep up the walls and cling to the rafters." He gladly looked the whole country round in the face—there was so much honesty and fair play in the world. He was an efficient smithy, but more than that; he was a success at the "flaming forge of life." The sparks that flew from his anvil envied the smiles on his face;

"His heart was in his work—and the heart
Giveth grace unto every Art."

It is not, thought Riley, musing on his "discovery," that a man must be a poet or an orator, or a geologist in order to be happy. The solution of the problem was

this: "Find the niche nature designed you to fill and enter it with thanksgiving."

He passed the shop in the summer of 1872. Thence onward for four years, one question incessantly called for an answer: What is my mission? Where is my place? "It was uppermost in my thought," said he—"the very dog-fennel at the roadside whispered it as I bowled from town to town."

"Where are they—the Afterwhiles—
Luring us the lengthening miles
Of our lives? Where is the *dawn*
With the dew across the lawn?
Where the *sun* that smites the frown
Of the eastward-gazer down?"

"I have been a happy man," said Henry Fuseli, "for I have always been employed in doing what I liked." Riley could not forget the fact that the British painter was eighty years old when he said it. The secret of his joy—how did the painter find it? Was it due to Lavater's speculations in Physiognomy? There was a "theatrical description" of those speculations which (mirthful as it seemed afterward) claimed young Riley's serious attention. Lavater held that the human figure signified its nature—human features expressed character. The history of an individual, future as well as past, could be read in the face as one would read from a printed page. Perhaps the eminent phrenologist had, after all, really helped Fuseli. He had told the painter that his profile indicated energy—the mouth promised a spirit of application—the nose seemed to be the seat of intrepid genius—and so forth. At any rate, Riley was bent on finding out what a phrenologist thought of his profile. While "sojourning" in Marion, Indiana, in November,

1872, the opportunity came at White's Hall. The Eminent Physiognomist and Delineator of Character, Doctor James Hedley, came from St. Louis to deliver eight lectures. Riley attended them—with what result, he tells us in his jovial way in "An Adjustable Lunatic":

"No one ever reads my character" (says the lunatic) —"no one ever will. Why, I've had phrenologists groping around among my bumps by the hour to no purpose, and physiognomists driving themselves cross-eyed; but they never found it and never will. The very things of which I am capable they invariably place beyond my capacity; and, with like sageness, the very things I can't do they declare me to be a master hand at. Why, old Fowler himself (Doctor Hedley) here the other night, thumped my head as mellow as a May-apple, and never came within a mile of it."

Nor could a man be explained and his place in the world be determined by genealogy. In that uncertain period and on several occasions afterward, Riley expressed himself unreservedly on the subject. Doctor S. Weir Mitchell once remarked to him that genius is a glad freak of nature in a good humor. "In a very important sense," said the Doctor, "it has neither grandfather nor grandchild." "Fishing for a pedigree," Riley added, "does not make a man successful." Family pride, this thing of tracing ancestry back to William the Conqueror—there was nothing in it. "Man is his own ancestor." He liked the figure which made a great man a mountain with the valley of his ancestors on one side and the depression of posterity on the other. He and John Hay once joked about their nationality. They were not chance children, they said. They could trace their genealogy all the way back to their parents. They were alike in that they

had back of them a little Scotch, a little English, a little German and a little French, but not enough of any one to make them anything but American. "I am Irish," said Riley, "from the word go. I show it in my tastes, I show it in my face—my face is a map of Ireland. My father's grandfather was Irish, and came from Cork or some old place over there, but never, when in my right mind, do I attribute my success to that fact. Did you ever try to count your ancestors?" he asked, while Hay still chuckled over his Irish sally. "W'y, I had so many great, great, great, great grandparents they could not crowd through the Alleghanies. Most of them had to remain on the other side."

In those years of uncertainty, prior to 1876, Riley was at sea without compass. "I was floundering," he said, "from Devil's Den to Dismal Slough" (a figurative expression based on literal fact, a trip he once made in the "Buckeye" through a swampy region in Tipton County). "Why is it," he asked, "that mortals in their efforts to find their place in the world have to search for it through the driving rain of blinding tears,

While out across the deeps of night
They lift the sails of prayer?
Why voyage off in quest of light
Nor find it anywhere?"

A less dismal picture presented itself one morning while riding along on an upper tributary of White-water. A bobolink pitched from the summit of a tree to the bosom of a meadow just as Riley had seen him pictured in the old McGuffey *Reader*. The fluttering songster was all sunshine, all sensibility and enjoyment. He was literally overcome with the ecstasy of his own music. The meadow was his place—his home.

"The bobolink," remarked Riley, "plays first fiddle all the time."

While scurrying through the country, "silently and slowly working out the train of indecisions in his mind," Riley was busy with the study of means to ends. While the "Buckeye" wound through a lumber section one day, he caroled the song of the saw-mill:

"They who turn the whizzing wheel of labor should be
blessed

With such return as life-long efforts earn,
And in the arms of Fortune, warmly pressed
Without a fever-thought of care to burn
The peaceful brow that sinks to blissful rest."

There was the farmer, "the founder of human civilization," who seemed to be solving the problem for all men. The earth provided the soil—and tools were also provided. "There were harrows," he jingled,

"There were reapers and mowers,
And patent grain sowers,
And drillers and tillers,
And cucumber hillers—
And all the long list of a thousand or more
That were found at the old Agricultural Store."

Why should there not be tools for the artist, or poet?—a vast storehouse somewhere on which he might draw forevermore. "Why this floundering!" he exclaimed to his traveling chum, bewailing the sad lot of poets; "*I can find no more happiness in a hub and spoke factory*"—and while they drove by a factory at Wabash the jingle dripped from his lips:

"The hands are as busy
As so many bees
Who work themselves dizzy
In blossoming trees;

And all the long hours
From morning till night
Their hearts are as flowers
That blossom delight."

It was all a question of knowing where to go, what to do and how to do it.

"Gracious God!" exclaimed Bill Nye, referring to Riley's ignorance of his mission, "he was blind as the fish in Echo River. There he was in the vast storehouse of the Land of Used-To-Be, the shapeless masses, the tools, the materials all about him. The tinkle of bells and fairy bugles were calling to him, but he was dull of hearing. From day to day capital facts of existence were hidden from his eyes. Suddenly in 1876, the mist rolled up and revealed them. He was like a sheep-herder I knew in Wyoming, who had been cooped up in a little eggshell valley for twenty years. One day he concluded to stroll farther away from the corral than he had ever strolled before. He ascended a high hill when lo! the snow-covered summits of the Rockies burst upon his wondering eyes. There stretching hundreds of miles from north to south were the blue fields of the sublime."

In those misty days Riley was far from home. He was the sea-swallow among the rooks and rushes of the land, Robert Louis Stevenson describes:

"Far from the loud sea-beaches,
Where he goes fishing and crying,
Here in the inland garden
Why is the sea-gull flying?

"There are no fish to dive for;
Here is the corn and lea;
Here are the green trees rustling,
Hie away home to the sea.

“Pity the bird that has wandered!
Pity the sailor ashore!
Hurry him home to the ocean,
Let him come here no more!

“High on the sea-cliff ledges,
The white gulls are trooping and crying;
Here among rooks and roses,
Why is the sea-gull flying?”

Why should a poet be tossing among paint buckets, sign-boards and concert wagons? Why should he have to beg for bread in Grub Street? Why hitch Pegasus to a plow, or condemn Apollo to pasture flocks for Admetus? The first consideration for success in any field was this, that a man find *real satisfaction, real romance in his work*. There were some things, as Ruskin said, men must do for bread, but they were not called upon to do anything into which they could not put their hearts. “See the young men from the halls of learning,” wrote Robert Burdette, from his Burlington sanctum. “Of the twenty-three who recently stepped across the threshold of life from an Eastern college, eleven are clerking in an auction store at fourteen dollars a month, one is running a fish-boat, two are learning the house-painting trade, and one is starving to death in a law office.”

“My Funny Fellow,” remarked Riley, commenting on the humorous item, “can be meek as a Quaker. When he wrote that he was as solemn as an undertaker. He was jesting, but what he wrote was not a jest. There is something wrong—whether a man is self-educated or college-educated—when his work is not in harmony with his natural bent.”

While dizzy with uncertainties, Riley went one night to see *Peg Woffington* played at the old Metropolitan

Theater in Indianapolis. Scenes in the first and fourth acts—the Green Room of the Theater Royal and Convent Garden—were but vaguely remembered; but what happened in Triplet's lodgings impressed him deeply. The cramped apartment was on a narrow back street in London. "Bricked in on all sides like a tomb, it was always solitary, always shady and sad." Theater patrons of forty years ago will recall that Triplet was a man ambitious to be a painter, actor and dramatist, but who in reality was a "goose" and had no genius either for writing, painting or acting. He was trying to support an invalid wife and four starving children. He had submitted tragedies to a theatrical manager. They had been returned without a word. The *real* tragedy came when Triplet realized the full weight of the blow. Then a sigh escaped him. The poor, rejected tragedies fell to the ground and he buried his head in his hands.

Then the resourceful Woffington entered Triplet's apartment with a basket of refreshments. When she had satisfied the hungry family with food, she seized his fiddle and showed him another of her enchantments. She played to the eye as well as to the ear and with such radiance that the children could not sit in their chairs; they could not keep still. She jumped up; so did they. She gave a wild Irish horroo. She put the fiddle in Triplet's hands. He played like Paganini. Woffington covered the buckle in gallant style (said Charles Reade, to whom Riley as well as the actors were indebted for the story). A great sunbeam had come into their home. They put their hands to their hearts; they looked at one another, and then at the goddess who had revived them. A few moments before, they were sorrowful

and hopeless. Now joy was in their hearts, and sorrow and sighing were fled.

"It was magical," said Riley, borrowing the novelist's thought, "that a mortal could so magnetize the soul of man. To enter the home of the poor and tune drooping hearts to daylight and hope—there is no nobler mission than that. Woffington did what she could for Triplet, but the Fates had other things in store. They thumped him some more. The managers rejected other tragedies. He failed in comedy. God knows it took a long while to break his heart, but at last it was broken—broken—quite broken. The only hit he made was an inheritance of twenty thousand pounds—and a somewhat happy exit the year our Great Washington died."

All through the play and weeks after, one thought was paramount in Riley's mind—the *tragedy of unrecognized genius*. "Triplet was a goose," said he, "but all are not geese who struggle for recognition. Was I a goose? Or, what is more tragic, was I an imprudent genius? Was I to struggle for years with difficulties and sink at last, as Emerson said, chilled, exhausted and fruitless, like a giant slaughtered by pins? I was in the dark."

There was Triplet. Nothing that had happened upon the great stage of the world seemed real to him. Was that the way of all the earth? Were there no such things as hearts and firesides and reward for happy endeavor? Was it all paint and paste and diamonds—all chance and anarchy? Was it true that "life is a tale told by an idiot"—that man is "a walking shadow—a poor, poor player, who frets and struts his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more"?

To add to the winter of his discontent Riley was

afflicted with that insidious Hoosier malady, known as the *blues*. His plight is best told in his own words:

"I admit," he wrote Mary Hartwell Catherwood, "that I have long fondled the actual belief that I am a poet, but it pains me to add that I have latterly received such evidence to the contrary that I have no hope of ever proving it to the world. But believe me, I am glad to know that others are succeeding while I fail. From the very opening remark you make regarding your own productions, I judge that your work commands remuneration, which certainly must be marvelous encouragement. I am sure that all the poems I have ever written, if bundled together, would not bring as much in market value as a bundle of radishes. In fact, I never succeeded in selling but one poem in my life, and I think there must have been some fatal mistake about that, for the editor when I next wrote, gleefully offering him another effort, wrote me saying he regretted that the sudden suspension of the magazine since the publication of my first poem compelled the return of my second. And I have always thought the death of that hitherto prosperous publication was on my hands. And so I worry on, but will you forgive me? I meant to write more briefly and say something. I have done neither."

In that period of confusion, Riley was perplexed, distressed sometimes by relatives and friends giving him advice—the complacency of dull old men lecturing fiery youth on plans of study and habits of thought. Like the mysterious lodger in *Old Curiosity Shop*, he wanted to do as he liked: "I want to go to bed when I like, get up when I like, come in when I like, go out when I like—to be asked no questions, and be surrounded by no spies."

Well-meaning friends were innocently in league with the fickle impulses of his own nature, furiously commanding him to do this and do that. Listening to them he fancied himself "poor, orphaned, insignificant. What was he that he should resist their will and think and act for himself? Every week new showers of deceptions to baffle and distract him." There were sign-painting showers that a few years before would have hurried him to the paintshop on wings. One order from an advertising agent for a dozen signs—one grocery—one dry goods—one drug—one sewing machine—one clothing—one boots and shoes—one stoves and tinware: in addition, one jewelry (watches and clocks), one planing mill representing laths, shingles, dressed lumber, and such material as mills turn out; one hotel suitable to put in one newspaper column, the rest suitable for two columns in county papers—all made in form of a rebus and ready for engraver in ten days.

Again there came an inquiry from a friend "down in Old Monroe," who wanted to know the price of county cards, barn cards, fence cards and so forth. There were several good sign-painting prospects in Bloomington. "Now, old fellow," said the letter, "come speedily. Telegraph me *yes* if you can come; if not, telegraph me *no*. One sign is gold leafing, a prescription case in a drug store; another is a fancy sign for a butcher. Come immediately. I have the 'rocks' in my jeans to pay your board for a month."

There came also a call from the "Graphics." One of their number had closed a contract in "Old Virginny" to advertise a tobacco company. "I want you for a partner," he wrote. "They guarantee fifty dollars a week and probably one hundred dollars. I can make it sure one hundred and fifty dollars a week for us two.

They want a sign of a log cabin with a negro in the door, red shirt and so forth. Make it on 8 by 10 paper. Make it hot. Send to Lynchburg and I will work up the finest snap of the year."

These orders and inquiries, and others of like character received indifferent attention. The "rising litterateur" painted an occasional sign, but the business was growing more and more incongruous. Fortune knows he sorely needed the "rocks," but he was disinclined to pursue them at his old trade. "There is a delightful tang to greenbacks," he remarked, "but it is not engraving orders I need now. I need a Peg Woffington who will loan me fifty pounds to be paid at Doomsday."

Fifteen years later, while touring Scotland, Riley reverted to the days when he was distressed with debt. "The most mortifying picture in all experience," he said, "is a man like Robert Burns commissioned of Heaven to write tender human verse, and having at the same time to make a wretched appeal for money, a pitiful cry for a loan to provide against the commonest household necessities. When I entered the house where Burns died, and walked through the kitchen and up the winding stairway to the room where he wrote his songs, I could hear above everything else the echo of his cry. It is fine in Franklin to look back and write pleasantly about the time when he was poor and homeless, but I'll wager a town lot that life was not romantic when he had but one loaf of bread in Philadelphia. The sunlight is on the other side of the earth when a man faces a misty future."

Writing the "Golden Girl," a brilliant young woman, who was then—November, 1876—in search of health in the Black River pine woods of Wisconsin, Riley disavowed interest in things that once claimed a large

share of his attention. "My going with the Graphics," he said, "seems not to suit you any better than it does me. I don't know that I shall go with them after all. You have no idea how distasteful it is to me. I some way feel as though I were being made a tool of to advance the interests of those who would smile to think 'what a fool he is.' Since my reformation I begin to feel an unusual sense of my importance and if I do lower myself to some uncongenial pursuit, it will be because an adverse fate drives me to it. I have heard nothing further from the Graphics since my last letter to you, and I believe I am happier. I wish I could make my living, for I am tired of the brush. I have been very busily occupied with literary matters. I have had a perfect hemorrhage of inspiration, producing quite a number of poems and of better quality than ever. I have written to Longfellow, Trowbridge and two or three lesser literary lights and enclosed them 'samples' of my fancy work; and with every reason to believe I shall have gratifying comments from them all."

Referring afterward to the "hemorrhage of inspiration," Riley said he wrote all night—"wrote till the rooster went into ecstasy on the subject of daylight."

One "blue" day in autumn he wrote his friend, B. S. Parker of Newcastle, a letter which occasioned the latter's reply in October, 1876, the year "Blue Jeans" Williams defeated Benjamin Harrison for governor. "How do you expect one at such a time," asks Parker, "to think of anythink but the *blues*—'Blue Jeans,' blue times and blue devils? I think a man who has a soul above buttons, and who occasionally hears the soft whispers of the Muse ought not to allow himself to become inter-

ested in politics (nor in sign-painting and the law, added Riley parenthetically). A poet must be a vagabond in a certain sense if he would not fail to discover the good that is in him. I do not mean that he should travel like a gipsy or play the tramp or starve and freeze by turns, but that he should not feel that existence is a thing to which no man has a just right unless he becomes of use to bankers, horse-swappers, curb-stone brokers and the like. In other words, if I could live my little life over, I would be content to be a poet and scribbler and only enter the so-called business field just so far as was necessary to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

There came also a letter from another friend, the fluent temperance advocate, Luther Benson, who had fought Demon Rum from boyhood. He knew from experience that life can be a nightmare of mockery, as he mournfully expressed it, a black, rayless waste of desolation. "I feel that neither of us," he wrote, "could make a meal on pleasure. I am handcuffed to misery and chained to agony." Riley was painfully conscious of a kindred affliction, but more acute than this was the pain he suffered from the darkness that obscured his choice of an occupation. His father saw no hope of success for him in the literary field. There was a squib in the law office which the father once read aloud in the hope of discouraging his son's literary ambition. That the son might feel its sting he read it in the presence of brother attorneys:

"What are the poets, take them as they fall,
Good, bad, rich, poor, much read, not read at all?
Them and their works in the same class you'll find:
They are the mere waste-paper of mankind."

Evidently the attorneys and the father made some

impression on the youthful poet, for it is a matter of record that he promised his father he "would not waste his days writing poetry." Almost immediately the Muse turned the promise down. As Longfellow wrote "The Spirit of Poetry" and "The Song of the Birds" in a law office, so Riley wrote "An Old Sweetheart" and "If I Knew What Poets Know." He kept his "law office poems," as he called them, in his desk under lock and key for several weeks, did not have the courage to let his father or the attorneys know what he was doing. The latter poem was written in one forenoon. "I commenced writing," said Riley, "but had great difficulty in getting it under way. While thrumming abstractedly with my pencil, my shoes attracted my attention and I decided to have them half-soled. I went immediately from the office down the stairway into the street, making directly for the shoe-shop across the way. I remember the street was muddy. Before reaching the shop, I stopped, turned about, retraced my steps to the office and wrote the poem rapidly to its conclusion. I had to labor on it—it didn't just make itself, but in a short time it was finished; I had the shoes repaired in the afternoon."

He yearned for the opinion of friends on "An Old Sweetheart," but was somewhat at a loss to know just how to direct their attention to the poem. He mailed a copy to the "Golden Girl," who from the first had been displeased over his waste of time in the law office. "If you," he asked, referring to the poem, "were sending this fiction of an overwrought brain to friends, what would you say about it?" She promptly put herself in his place and returned the following:

"In humbly and almost fearfully submitting this last fiction of an overwrought brain to the unappre-

ciative and oftentimes careless care of the U. S. Mail, I must in confidence confess it is not given to the world to reform public schools—change the form of government of our prisons—lead to a better state of affairs in our pulpits—nor yet to ‘show up spiritualism in its true light’—but to show conclusively the utterly demoralizing effect of a lawyer in a *Green Field* of labor.”

The reader should note here that “An Old Sweet-heart”—perhaps the most popular American poem—was the product of what seems to mortal vision unpoetic conditions. It was written in that hour of deep darkness just before the dawn and started on its way to immortality by the fitful winds of uncertainty. At the narrowest part of the defile, says the Persian proverb, the valley begins to open.

His legal ventures ended peremptorily with his second attempt. “In the dog-days of a summer hot as the hinges of Purgatory,” said he, “I tucked my ‘law poems’ up my sleeve, turned my back on the attorney business, and my face to a future as mysterious and hopeless as a block of mining stock.”

Golden encouragement came from the “Golden Girl.” She infused strength in his resolution. He had sent her *Bleak House* to read. In response she assured him that the law had too many convolutions for poets. “Have little to do with people who are too deep for you,” she wrote, in the guise of Mrs. Bagnet. “Be careful of interference with matters you do not understand—do nothing in the dark—be a party to nothing underhanded or mysterious—and never put your foot where you can not see the ground.”

The author of “Little Brown Hands,” Mary H. Krout, wrote also, in October, 1876, of his dislike of the law

as a profession. "That goes to prove," said she, "that you are a gentleman of better judgment than I even supposed you to be."

In that year of 1876, the Voices called to him again. There seemed at times a deceptive clamor about them, but frequently they were musical. He listened to them and began to sing of them:

"Down in the night, he heard them—
The Voices—unknown—unguessed;
They whispered and lisped and murmured
And would not let him rest."

"Yes, he heard voices," said Myron Reed, "and he was lonesome, lonesome as Joan of Arc in the garden. She heard voices, but nobody else heard them. Each man has his private individual revelation of what he ought to think and say and do."

There came also the Voice of wisdom from Longfellow, one of the rare providential admonitions of his life. One day he gleaned this from "Morituri Salutamur":

"Study yourself; and most of all note well
Wherein kind nature meant you to excel"—

sovereign lines, and henceforward the key to much that Riley said and did. He saw as never before the significance of YOUTH—its illusions, aspirations and dreams. It assured him that all possibilities were in his hands. He was not to hesitate, but with ambitious feet,

"ASCEND THE LADDER LEANING ON THE CLOUD."

Henceforth he thought deeply on his mission. As he wrote in one of his "law office poems," hearts in pain

should be glad again and the false should be true if he knew what poets know:

“If I knew what poets know,
I would find a theme
Sweeter than the placid flow
Of the fairest dream:
I would sing of love that lives
On the errors it forgives;
And the world would better grow
If I knew what poets know.”

In that transitional year, he did not, as Byron in a dream, wander darkling on a rayless, pathless coast. The beacons had not all disappeared. But he did literally look up “with mad disquietude into a dull sky and then lie down and hide his eyes and weep.” As is seen in lines he then wrote and afterward omitted from his poem, “In the Dark”:

“He moaned with a passionate yearning,
And a flood of hopes and fears
Flowed o’er his troubled spirit,
And ebbcd in a tide of tears.

“The gleam of a star through the window
Fell like a soothing touch;
And darkness wore to the dawning
For which he longed so much.”

CHAPTER XIII

VISION OF HIS MISSION

WALKING one April morning through an orchard with a friend, his eyes on the blossoming trees and his thoughts in the sky, Riley suddenly pitched forward into a post-hole. In the twinkling of an eye the Tennysonian sentiment came to his lips:—

“O let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet;
Then let come what come may,
What matter if I go mad,
I shall have had my day.”

The lines, repeated at random, were an innocent prelude to his “prolific decade”—the ten years of poetic effusion, whose natal days, in the providence of Heaven, mantled with rapture the summer of 1876. A glimpse of that rapture is seen in his remarks, three years following, to the Thousandth Man, Myron Reed. One winter night they were talking on the significance of dreams. Riley was in a state of ecstasy over a vision that had crossed his path. “Nor was I on the road to Damascus,” said he, “unless all men travel that way. I was vibrating between the woods and the law office, had no company except my own thoughts; but my ears were opened; I heard a voice—heard it for several days.

Why it should call, so unexpectedly, to me, an obscure mortal in a backwoods corner of the world, is beyond my comprehension."

"Pleasures and visions," returned Reed, "are come upon, or they come upon you. Only one man has seen Niagara Falls, and he was in search of something else—something prosaic, something that had work in it; and all of a sudden he heard the steady throb and pound, and a little later saw the blue and white wonder."

And what was the *vision*? Just the plain simple fact that he was to write poetry. "Jay Whit," the sign-painter, the Argonaut, was to be the humble instrument for the transmission of song to men; a voice he was to be for the "inarticulate masses—the soiled and the pure—the rich and the poor—the loved and the unloved." Whence the songs? The Argonaut did not know—

"All hitherward blown
From the misty realm, that belongs
To the vast Unknown.

"The voices pursue him by day,
And haunt him by night,
And he listens, and needs must obey
When the Angel says, 'Write!'"

His fortunate opportunity had come. Not in a moment, like Hugh Wynne's, but in a fortnight he had made a decisive resolution, which, once made, controlled him, and permitted no future change of plan.

"Then straightway before
His swimming eyes, all vividly was wrought
A *vision* that was with him evermore."

Now that he had a definite object, his character and

purpose were to be written broadly on his face. No waste of time in platitudes; none of the inexpressive similarity that obscures the men and women who go in public to see and be seen. He was to be an individual doing the work Heaven designed him to do, and in doing it, he was to give expression to truth. The *vision* supplied him with the sides of a ladder, but, as Dickens had told him in the old Shoe-Shop, the *cleats* were to be made of stuff to stand wear and tear, and the Argonaut was to make and nail them on.

His personal reference to the *vision* was always virile and stimulating. "I had a dream once years and years ago," he wrote a friend after he had tamed the lion of public recognition, "a vision that I should some day be just what I am this minute, and it made me a different person." He was an impatient wind from inland regions come suddenly to the seaside, a wind that had been retarded by tanglewood and ridges. There was a call from the deep; the prospect was divine as his own lines attest:

"And the swelling sea invited me
With a smiling, beckoning hand,
And I spread my wings for a flight as free
As ever a sailor plans,
When his thoughts are wild and his heart beguiled
With a dream of foreign lands."

The dream was the more perfect image of the dream he had when the musician played—the "fine frenzy" that entranced him while under the sway of Ole Bull's magic wand.

Writing the "Golden Girl," he was pleased to tell her that he had been busily occupied with literary matters, that he had had (as we have seen) "*a perfect hemorrhage of inspiration.*"

"Crowding measures" had gushed like a fountain from his heart. He had produced poems of better quality than ever, and had sent "samples of his fancy work" to Trowbridge and Longfellow. The *vision* was "heaven's own baptismal rite." In the *Indianapolis Journal* office in after years, he was wont to call it, "My Vision of Summer":

" 'Twas a marvelous *vision* of Summer—
That morning the dawn was late,
And came like a long dream-ridden guest
Through the gold of the Eastern gate.

"And back from the lands enchanted,
Where my earliest mirth was born,
The thrill of a laugh was blown to me
Like the blare of an elfin horn."

The tuneful flame had the fervor of the "poetic rage" that flowed from the heart of Burns when the Scottish Muse came to the clay cottage to bind the holly round his brow. It was the *gleam* that Tennyson saw in the summer-morn of life.

As Riley said in "The Shower," he was transfigured; his empty soul brimmed over; *he was drenched with the love of God*. He was also aware of a happiness in his work hitherto unknown. What he did was *interesting*—"interesting," said he, "because I was happy in my thoughts. The more interesting my thoughts, the happier I was."

"A vision may beget some wonder and well it may," said Ike Walton, "for most of our world are at present possessed with an opinion that visions and miracles are ceased." "They have not ceased," said Riley. "Again and again I have been guided by an invisible Destiny. There has almost always come to me a fore-

THE DAILY GRAPHIC
\$12.00 PER YEAR

THE GRAPHIC COMPANY.

HEARTH AND HOME
\$2.50 PER YEAR

NEW YORK. Feb 18th 1876.

Mr. J. W. Riley.

Dr. Sir:

The sudden decision of
the Graphic Managers, to discontinue
the publication of Hearth & Home
forthwith, compels the return of
the accompanying very graceful
poem, which I should, otherwise,
publish with pleasure.

Trusting that you may not
be discouraged from further
exercise of your literary talent
through a more fortunate medium,
I remain

Yours, respectfully,

The Editor of H. & H.



FOR THE FARM, GARDEN, AND FIRESIDE

HEADING OF HEARTH AND HOME
Showing the Editor's cottage at "Edgewood"



"THAT SIGN IN THE POST OFFICE"
The silhouette figures spell Riley

cast of events in my life. I once told my brother that if I put several of my stories and poems together and gave attention to delivery, I could succeed on the platform. He laughed derisively and for a time that was the end of that dream. My old schoolmaster, Lee O. Harris, used to send poems to the *Indianapolis Sentinel* and get beautiful notices. I wondered whether the day would come when I should contribute to the *Journal* and read praise of my work. I like to believe as the pious men of old that every man has a particular guardian angel—his Dæmon—to attend him in all his dangers, both of body and soul. There have been crises in my life when I was awed by what I saw. Like Job—a spirit passed before my face; my hair stood up; fear and trembling came upon me, and made all my bones to shake.”

The Argonaut had *dreams* while drifting about with the “Graphics”—not a vision, however; not the clear, decisive disclosure of what he was to do.

He had a dream when he received a talisman (as he thought) in the letter from *Hearth and Home*—his first check for a poem. An air-castle it was with tissue of riches. He saw himself an Aladdin with the magic ring on his finger, in a garden, among trees with fruits of many colors, their foliage beautifully blended with emeralds, pearls and rubies. In fancy he filled his pockets with diamonds from the trees and afterward, by scattering them right and left in handfuls, gained the affections of the people as the young Aladdin had done. It was dawn, midday and moonlight—all in one:

“A thousand fairy throngs
Flung at him, from their flashing hands,
The echoes of their songs.”

Throughout his “misty years” his mind was a nur-

sery for "thick-coming fancies." He pleased his whimsical tendency with one from the "British Book." The gay John Flaxman, fond of merry legends, had invented for the amusement of his family the story of the Chinese Casket, giving its genealogy, locating the original in the bowers of Paradise and afterward a reproduction of it, made of scented wood and precious gems, in China. There it was protected in a sanctuary by a princess, who, understanding the language of the birds, had been taught to prize it by what she heard in the song of the nightingale. The Casket was to contain the verse and maxims of poets and philosophers. There coming a day when the treasure was unsafe in China, being exposed to the malice of magicians, the princess carried it to Mount Hermon and deposited it on "a high and holy hill." There Sadi wrote for the Casket while a guardian angel watched over it. The poet died and Hafiz wrote, but when loose visions floated before his sight and his strains lost their purity and virtue, indignant angels snatched the Casket away, resolved to bear it to a distant isle, where virtuous works of art and virtuous people abound. The angelic keepers floated with their treasure over inland vales toward the Golden West. The Muses saluted the flying pageant as it passed, the Colossus of Rhodes bowed his head and the gods of Greece clapped their hands. The fleets of nations waved their pennants in approval and in due season

"The godlike genius of the British Isle
Received the Casket with benignant smile."

Flaxman's story ended with Britain but Riley and an early booklover of his native town, whose fancy was capricious like his own, carried the Casket across the

Atlantic. Longfellow had written his sweetest verse for it and both thanked Heaven the poet had kept it free from the taint of corruption and vice. "My boy," said his friend half-seriously, "the day will come when you will write songs for the Casket." The friend (an intuitive young woman) was not certain that he would succeed Longfellow but certain she was he would do what he could, and that what he did would be musical. "It was the thought of an idle moment," said Riley, "a joke taken seriously"—seriously, just as one other time he was capering along the street with some friends, talking about a wondrous casket he had found and his purpose to fill it with verse—the friends thinking him in earnest when he was "only joking."

It may be true that "God hides the germs of every living thing, that no record holds the moment by the clock, of any discovery"; but surely, if mortal ever knew he was born again, ever knew he was face to face with a turning-point in his career, Whitcomb Riley knew it the summer of 1876. A period in his life had come when he lived years in a few weeks. Henceforth his faith seldom failed. Misgivings became less numerous. The *vision* was

"The fountain light of all his day,
The master light of all his seeing."

"I had come through life," he said, "just dallying in the shallow eddies of a brook; now I was a river. I yearned to float and flow out God-ward. Life was richer than ever I dreamed it could be when I was a trustful child peering out across the future. There is no rapture like the joy of finding your place and the assurance that you have found it. It is to be transported from midnight to the rosy light of morning."

“A great ripe radiance grew at last
And burst like a bubble of gold,
Gilding the way that the feet danced on—
And that was the dawn—the Dawn!”

That Riley concealed the particulars of his *vision* from his friends has since been thought rather too diplomatic for one who usually did things in the open. Whisper it to no one, said the prudent Longfellow—keep your plans a secret in your own bosom—the moment you uncork them the flavor escapes. Riley proceeded to act accordingly, not only with reference to the *vision* but in other ways. His brother, as we have seen, ridiculed an early dream and others had treated his forecasts of a career for himself with similar indifference. Such had been his humiliation that he resolved to go alone. “I did not go round sounding a timbrel in the people’s ears,” he said, “but clung to my purpose and kept my own counsel”—and doubtless he did. Myron Reed seems to have been the first friend to know of the *vision* as a revelation. And, characteristic, he gave the Argonaut another bit of wisdom for his log-book. “The Cunard Line,” said Reed, “has never lost a passenger. That is not a matter of good luck; that is a matter of good oak, and good iron, and good seamanship.” Fortunately the Argonaut was provided with a shield and boom both made of iron—an “iron mask” and an iron will. The former kept him from the intrusions of strangers and friends. With the latter he stuck to his purpose through all kinds of weather, with all sorts and conditions of men. Through all the vicissitudes of his literary fortune, his will, like a Richard Doubledick, was his unsleeping companion—“firm as a rock, and true as the sun.” It was not a blustering will; rather was it like the steady tug of gravitation.

With that and a little motto from *Bleak House*—"Trust in Providence and Your Own Efforts"—he went forth to transmute the *white moments* of existence into music for the sons and daughters of men.

He needed the *iron will* from the beginning. His friends tempted him with "that object of universal devotion, the almighty dollar." Counselors came to persuade him that fame (as they thought of his future) was "the satellite of fashion," that the applause of the crowd was worth more than the silent devotion to an ideal, and his father discouraged his venture in the new field:

"My son! the quiet road
Which men frequent, where peace and blessings travel,
Follows the river's course, the valley's bending."

A rover, with whom Riley had once toured a few Indiana towns, was "not making a dollar with his present show in Pittsburg." He was "waiting for something to turn up. We are going to take a 'Rip Van Winkle Company' out in three weeks. We will do the small towns. You can have any part you want except Rip. Rip is the best drawing bill in America."

The "Golden Girl," a talented musician, who also had dreams of the stage, sought him for a rôle in "The Star of Mystery Company," or rather the fragments of the company. There was to be Mirth—Music—Magic—and Mystery. "Should I," she wrote, "secure a position for you with good salary, will you go? That is my hope of seeing you. Won't we have FUN? You will carry my grip and go to breakfast with me and take me to the opera house. Yes, and waltz with me behind the scenes while the orchestra plays 'The Blue Danube,' and people go

wild with expectation waiting for the 'show to begin,' and little boys grow impatient and pummel each other on the front seats. And we will go down the street the next day and see the people. You will get mad at everybody I don't like and I'll like everybody you do. Life will be enchantment."

Nor did the proffers of advice cease with Riley's choice of the literary field. He was annoyed with "overtures from foreign lands," as he phrased his temptations, till the publication of his first book. "The lecture field is the place for you—and don't you forget it," wrote a literary aspirant three years after his *vision*. "Writing is a starvation process. A fellow is likely to die of inanition. As a friend of mine says, 'Fate overtakes him so *dern* sudden'; and it makes no difference how good the writing may be. A writer must run the gauntlet that looks to the beginner like the track of the Union Pacific railway stretching in a straight line clear across the western edge of space, *and all the way up hill*."

The Argonaut was unshaken. None of these things moved him, nor others of like nature though ever so numerous and persistent. He gave heart and soul to his poems, thinking about them and writing them while painting signs for his daily bread.

There was singleness of purpose in the *vision*. It did not trouble Riley with thoughts of being a great man. Launcelot said it not more humbly than he:

"In me there dwells
No greatness, save it be some far-off touch
Of greatness to know well I am *not* great."

Seldom if ever was a young man of genius more ignorant of his powers. He was not certain that he

possessed genius. That "gift of God" might be his; time would tell. For many years he had doubts of the value of what he wrote and its reception by the world, but never after the *vision* had he a shadow of doubt that he was commissioned to sing.

Riley had a vision of his mission, but not a vision of the obstacles. Whatever situation in life you ever wish or propose for yourself, said the old poet Shennstone, acquire a clear and lucid idea of the inconveniences attending it. Riley acquired no such lucid idea but plunged at once into a sea of troubles—or rather some invisible something forced him into it. He did not count the cost. After he had been buffeted on the sea, and his work was practically done, he saw that the *vision* had shown but one side of the picture. It was significant, he thought, that the Golden Fleece—his fanciful name for poetry—had been nailed to a tree in the grove of the *war-god*. The lesson was this, that poetry is an inaccessible thing. "The people think the way of the singer is the way of peace," he remarked after he had practically fulfilled his mission. "They are mistaken. From first to last the poet has to war against discouragement, nightmares, blockades, and other perverse conditions." It was another way of his saying that the poet is a Pilgrim.

"The peculiar thing about us," wrote his friend Reed, "is our disobedience. We see the light and hear the voice but heed it not. We are woefully afraid of being alone with God and the *vision* of our province." The advice was timely. Riley had written on the tablet of his being—*obedience to the light*, but like all aspiring men, his pure mind was refreshed when stirred up by way of remembrance. Thus was he launched on a literary career, looking ever upward and always

with a true sense of the dignity of his mission, though at intervals he "played with jingle" for relaxation and amusement. True he was to have little rest and less peace; but he was to "enjoy the fiery consciousness of his own activity." The *vision* was an abiding comfort. He was twenty-six years old. What a day of rapture had been his had he been permitted to part the veil of the future, and see on the further shore of his career, one of his beautiful books, and read from the author of *Pike County Ballads*, perhaps the most cordial letter he ever received—"the finest letter ever penned," was Riley's word. Longfellow wrote him the year of the *vision* that he had "the true poetic faculty and insight." Then was the *dawn*—he was *beginning* to do the thing. When Hay wrote him, twenty-six years later, he had *done* it:

Washington, D. C., Nov. 12, 1902.

Dear Mr. Riley—

I thank you most cordially for thinking of me and sending me your "Book of Joyous Children." I was alone last night—my joyous little people have grown up and left me. My fine boy is dead—my two girls are married, my young son is away at school—and so I read, in solitary enjoyment, these delightful lyrics, so full of feeling and easy natural music. It is a great gift you have, and you have not been disobedient to the *heavenly vision*. Long may you live to enjoy it, and share it in your generous way with others.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN HAY.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GOLDEN GIRL

WHITCOMB RILEY dreamed of love and marriage. Not to admit this would be equivalent to denying the qualities of the true poet. Inadequately, and sometimes half-seriously, he expressed his dream in verse:—

“And oh my heart—lie down! Keep still!
If ever we meet, as I pray we will;
All ideal things will become fixed facts—
The stars won’t wane and the moon won’t wax;
And my soul will sing in a ceaseless glee,
When I find the woman that rhymes with me.”

That he never found his mate, that he failed to find the nuptial rhyme, is now the “fixed fact.” That he strove ardently in his early manhood to find her is also a fact, although in his bachelor days he was wary of talk about it and sometimes slow to admit it. It was his fortune to meet many interesting women, some of them gifted, some divinely fair, but it was not his fortune to meet “the right woman.” And if it be true, as a certain philosopher has said, that the best works proceed from unmarried or childless men, perhaps it was Destiny’s design he should not meet her. When collecting poems for his first book—then a man of three-and-thirty years—he reached the conclusion that celibacy was to be his lot and ever afterward stoutly affirmed that his fate was inexorably decreed, sometimes woefully signing himself, “Yours, Fate &

Co." It was tragic, but he realized that, should he find the "right woman," she would fail to find in him the "right man." He "put a washer on his affections," as he phrased it, and lodged in his bosom an old saying from Thales, the answer to the question when genius should marry: *A young genius, not yet; an elder genius, not at all.*

"I know of nothing," said John Fitch, the inventor, "so perplexing and vexatious to a man of feelings as a turbulent wife and steamboat building. For one man to be teased with both is to be looked upon as the most unfortunate man in the world." Riley was aware that the vexation is the same in poem building, but he was not so ungallant as to lay all the blame for domestic infelicity at the door of the wife. As he saw it, Fitch was at fault for going into partnership with a woman that did not rhyme with him.

"The highest compliment I can pay to a woman," said Riley, at the age of fifty,—answering a wise and beautiful married woman who was curious to know why he had not married—"the highest compliment I can pay to a woman is *not* to marry her." He painfully realized then, as he did not when a lover, that he was, by temperament, at least, disqualified for the obligations of matrimony.

After he had settled down to hard literary work in Indianapolis, he wrote in a letter to a woman writer: "The season has been one long carnival of enjoyment. The city has been thronged with peerless maidens from all quarters of the globe, and even as I write, a semi-circle of them lies at my feet 'like a rainbow fallen on the grass,' all wanting me to fly with them and be their own. But I am an ambitious sort of prince and shall

not fly, having registered a vow to wed only an angel without fleck or flaw of earthly imperfection and with a pair of snowy wings 'leven feet from tip to tip."

If peradventure his thought wandered to marriage, it was never with the serious consideration of former years. Like the sailor in "Tales of the Ocean," who in fancy was transported to the side of his Nancy Flanders, he was suddenly disturbed in his dream of "bridal raptures" by the gruff call of the captain: "All hands ahoy!"—and as the sailor took to his ropes, so the poet took to his pencil.

It should be borne in mind that a poet is human—so human that he is likely to have many sweethearts. Like those of other men, his love affairs may be the subject of humorous or serious comment. Speculations about them may even be beneficial. His tender passions, his attachments and endearments may seem sacred, but they should not be wholly outside the pale of public consideration, since they belong to the world of joys and sorrows. Wherever literature has lived, woman has so impressed her beauty and character on the heart of the poet that all aspects of nature—the stars and the clouds, the hills and the trees and the motions of the sea—have been to him as mirrors and heralds of her luster and love. It seems superfluous to add that she sustains a vital relation to the production of verse.

In that period of visions and dreams, those intricate years of the seventies, a new love was a great event for the Argonaut;

"The world was divided into two parts—

Where his sweetheart was, and where she was not."

He would experience a few hours or weeks—seldom

longer—in dreaming the happy hours away, and then the Fates would afflict him with the woe of hapless love. Often a rival would appear. “Our young friend, J. W. Riley,” said a county paper local, “has a poem on ‘The Lost Kiss.’ That kiss was lost over in Sugar Creek township, and we know the young man who found it.” Often an impassable gulf appeared between him and his sweetheart which she could no more cross than he. After several ineffectual efforts to restore communication he would face the other way and, as he said, “wander down the corridors of inclemency lonesome as a pale daylight moon—

Ah! lone as a bard may be!

In search of the woman that rhymes with me.

“In search of what? Of any hand that is no more, of any hand that never was, of any touch that might have magically changed his life.” There is nothing so embarrassing as to be a lover,—“nothing so harassing,” said he. “A terrible thing it is, if the girl is not in love with you. She will make a football of your heart and torment you with anguish from Dan to *Beer-sheba*.” Man, he perceived, had weighed the sun; he had determined the path of the stars, and the moment of an eclipse to the fraction of a second, but he had not solved the mystery of love;

“Its passions will rock thee

As the storms rock the ravens on high.”

“I tell you,” Riley exclaimed, “there is something tragically wrong with the married state! Rip Van Winkle’s fate is not fiction. Little wonder he was driven to drink—and the Catskill woods: *I love de trees—dey keep me from de wind and rain—and dey never blows me up.*”

Writing to a county paper of a compositor, a printer friend who had married a Greenfield girl, Riley was outwardly facetious, but beneath the surface quite serious about it. "We know little of the bride," he wrote, "other than that she is fair and womanly beyond all words; but as for the compositor—we know him and recall with emotions of awe the way he used to tangle up our silken sentences and crush and mangle beyond all hope of recognition the many prattling puns we intrusted to his care. The manifold inflictions he heaped upon us then we bore in mute despair; now we exult, for he is wedded to another, and our 'schooner' of delight foameth over—

My dear young friend, regaled with love,
With all your heart ablaze,
Don't think yourself a lucky dog
For all your married ways;
But learn to wear a sober face—
Be hopeful as you can—
'Tis really quite a serious thing
To be a married man."

There was one sweetheart, the "Golden Girl," who—since at least a dozen poems cluster round her—merits more than casual mention. The young woman who could prompt her lover to write such a masterpiece as "Fame" is not to be passed lightly by. "Her history," to phrase it in Riley's words, "was as strangely sweet and sad as any you can find in the pages of romance. Her letters evinced a mind far above the common. She was a womanly woman. I recall her unaffectedness and simplicity with the tenderest emotions."

She was "a dreamer of dreams," another Mary Chitwood, giving expression to her aspiring genius in prose, however, instead of verse, living in

the woods as "the little singer of Franklin County" once lived in seclusion in Indiana. She was frail—the roses in her cheeks were omens of a fatal malady. She was "one of the beads," she wrote, "in that starry circle, that flaming necklace of some kind strung together somewhere in great black space." She was "a soul sea-blown, that knew not of any harbor, one of those unanchored ships," she wrote again when trying her fortune in another state, "that

'Sail to and fro, and then go down
In unknown seas that none shall know,
Without one ripple of renown.' "

With her, into the *unknown*, went her lover's letters, which—to judge from the fragments left—doubtless contained some of the loveliest prose he ever wrote. Honey, they were, "dripping from the comb," she said, "freighted with hope and the brightest blessings ever dropped carelessly out of Angel fingers upon this earth; they are the sparkling gems that adorn and diadem my life with happiness."

Riley's dream of the "Golden Girl," could it be depicted in words, would read like some legend of the tender passion in a Forest of Love. He was another Orlando, hanging verses on the trees for his Rosalind, although her temple of the wood was some five hundred miles away. The trees were books and she was to read them. And as usual there were not wanting Touchstones to mock his effusions, to say that poets are capricious, that lovers are given to poetry, and so on. The first word about her came from the lovable Graphic Chum, James McClanahan. Although he and Riley had dissolved partnership in sign-painting, they had not dissolved their friendship. When on the road, McClana-

han continued to write of new discoveries. "I have found a golden girl," he said, on one of his return trips to Indiana, "and I have brought you her beautiful hand" (taking a tin-type picture of her hand from his pocket). "She loves art and poetry; she writes stories; and if she writes you I want you to answer with your best. She deserves literary friends." He went on to tell of her other gifts, how she could play the piano, guitar, harp and violin. He talked about her beauty—and her suitors, but did not tell that he was one of them.

McClanahan had first met her at Black River Falls, Wisconsin, just before her decision to seek health in the pine region. One day after acquaintance had ripened into friendship, when genius was the subject of their talk, he said, "I want you to know a friend of mine in Greenfield, Indiana, Whitcomb Riley. He is a coming man in the literary field. I love him better to-day than any one in the world except my mother. He is my ideal: he is the whitest man on earth." He then read to her several Riley poems. Such praise did not fall lightly on the heart of the "Golden Girl."

"How is it you woo?" asks Riley in a poem: ;

"How is it you woo and you win?

Why, to answer you true—the first thing that you do
Is to simply, my dearest—begin."

So they began, and one result, to say nothing of love, was a correspondence that was as thought-sparkling as it was tender and beautiful. The "Golden Girl" was alone with her mother, young sister, and stepfather in the Black River pinery. Though ill, she was ambitious. She had written a story when sixteen, and the literary impulse was strong in her. Riley thought of her as a lonely wild-flower singing and sorrowing with wood-

warblers among the giant trees. He sent her a waif of his Grub Street days, "A Poet's Wooing," to find out whether she was "sharper than an eastern wind," and whether he was to march *from* her or march *to* her. His chief desire was to cheer her in her loneliness. Other letters were written to that end.

"What can I do to make you glad—
As glad as glad can be,
Till your clear eyes seem
Like the rays that gleam
And glint through a dew-decked tree?"

One letter was "filled with the most cheerful ideas he could express." He drew grotesque pictures with silly dialogues beneath, representing experiences on the road with the Graphic Company and "Standard Remedies." He said "funny things till tears of laughter rose to her eyelids." She was "prostrated with the sense of hilarity." When several letters had passed, he fell in love—in love with an ideal; a creature of his imagination; "an echo of his heart":

"And, like a lily on the river floating,
She shone upon the river of his thoughts."

Truly, as Riley saw her in his dream, the "Golden Girl" *was*—as Longfellow has it—"the creature of his imagination." The woman did not live who could meet the requirements of that dream. Often he saw her floating in her birch bark canoe on Black River. The thought of her quickened his numbers. "It is as easy to write verse," he wrote, "as for the ripples of the river to prattle." He longed to see the light of her smile,

"To peer in her eyes as a diver might
Peer in the sea ere he leaps outright—
Catch his breath, with a glance above,
And drop full-length in the depths of love."

It was a versatile correspondence, in which their hopes and fears, their perceptions, fancies and witticisms ranged from visions of fortune and fame down to their weight and age. (She, light as a leaf, "possessed the proud dignity of ninety pounds"; he, one hundred and ten; she was twenty years old; he, twenty-six.) As interest in her deepened, Riley flattered himself that he had found "that golden fleece, a woman's love." And he *had*, but Destiny denied him the joy of taking it to his own cottage—not the dream of it, however, which he afterward included in "Ike Walton's Prayer"—

"Let but a little hut be mine
Where at the hearthstone I may hear
The cricket sing
And have the shine
Of one glad woman's eyes to make
For my poor sake,
Our simple home a place divine;—
Just the wee cot—the cricket's chirr—
Love, and the smiling face of her."

"Dame Durden" and "My Little Woman," he called her, while she smiled at his pleasantries and returned with "My King Harold" and "My Little Man," lovingly twitting him on the poverty of his "Graphic" days:

"Blessings on thee, Little Man,—
Barefoot Bard with cheek of tan,
Run to Love and Nature's store,
And go barefoot nevermore."

The clever "Little Woman" had definite opinions on good blood and the importance of worthy ancestors. She was "proud of the rich old southern blood in her veins—proud that she could trace her forefathers back hundreds of years and find honor, riches and fame."

She had the artistic temperament. "We are kindred spirits," she wrote,—“said kinship exposed and explained or money refunded.” She swept cobwebs from the “Little Man’s” mind:

“Little old woman, and whither so high?—
To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky.”

She signally influenced Riley in his decision to quit the law. The law office was the “Growlery.” She charged him “to abandon it and nail up the door.” It was tragic for genius such as he possessed “to be lost in the mountains of Wiglomeration.” In February, 1876, soon after he had entered his father’s office the second time, she contributed a little sarcasm with her love. “And you are going to be a lawyer,” she wrote, “and a famous one, too, I’ll be bound!—Why, how convenient. When I want a divorce you will be my counsel, tell all kinds of stories about my husband’s villainy, pound your fist on a big book, and rumple up your hair until the jury quails before the breeze of eloquence which fairly takes them off their feet.”

Riley was in happy valley when he could give the “Golden Girl” charming names. Reflecting on “the many hearts she had touched and awakened and the admiration and love she had won,” he thought of her as the lovely Esther Summerson of *Bleak House*. “I have a new name for you,” he wrote, “Dame Durden, and I want you for my sake as well as your own to read the book.” One passage in it expressed his sentiment as to what a woman should be: “When a young lady is as mild as she is game, and is game as she is mild, that is all I ask, and more than I expect. Then she becomes a Queen, and that is about what you are.”

In the spring of 1876 Riley had suffered from her

long silence. One might explain her silence by citing her love for McClanahan, provided Riley did not know of her love. But he did know of it although he was not aware that she loved his friend deeply. She was still writing Riley in the spirit of a literary correspondence, and did not then know what she sorrowfully realized a few weeks later, that the Graphic Chum was a capricious young man, blown hither and thither by baffling winds. Since 1872 he and Riley had been cruising on a choppy sea. The caprice in each had been about equally distributed. Riley was soon to find a moorage. The lovable chum, alas! was never to find one. The Fates tangled his feet in a skein of ill-fortune and held them in it to the end. In answer to the letter about her silence, the girl in the pine woods assured him of her pride in the possession of his friendship. He was her "dear old philosopher," to be so patient with her. "It is a good thing I am a woman," she wrote, "for if I had to be a man I'd want to be Riley. You belong to us,"—referring to her love for the Graphic Chum. "I love you next to him, he loves you next to me, and you love me after him, and we all love each other. Bless me, what a cobweb! 'Amo, Amas, Amat—Amamus, Amatis, Amant.' So you have discovered me in a sea of fiction. To know that one has been discovered, that one's dear old friend has formed an opinion at last, and yet be unable to know what it is, because of not having read *Bleak House*. Too bad. Of course I shall read the book, but my curiosity is aroused; tell me about her. I wonder if Dickens affects you as he affects me. Do his books ever make you feel hungry?

"You are very strange. In your bitter, bitter moods I understand you and know you best. Ah, don't I know what they are? How I have fought and fought, bat-

ting all alone till I knew that they made me older than the years of time. You can't imagine the joy with which I read your words. Your letters are like a magnetic battery. I thank you for the poems. They are beautiful."

Writing him at another time, her hands trembled as she read his words. His earnestness touched her. She smiled with tears in her eyes to read of the "Higher Power than ours discovering us to each other." He was like a book whose mysteries would not promptly unravel at her bidding. Little by little she followed the thread until she grasped his meaning. "There is a beautiful song," she wrote, "'If My Wishes Come True.' Maybe you know it. Learn it and remember Dame Durden when you sing it." Then she discovered to him some of her own moods and confessed to many errors of her way.

He did not learn the song, but, in part, wrote one of his own, "When My Dreams Come True"—or rather, in imagination, made her the author of it. The "Little Woman" must not be cast down because of manifold transgressions; she must not sink beneath any weight of woe. Two lines were written expressly to lighten her discouragement:

"The blossom in the blackest mold is kindlier to the eye
Than any lily born of pride that looms against the sky."

Commenting on the lines and their origin, at a later period, Myron Reed observed that the nectar of song is distilled from the dews of sorrow. "Your well fed, nicely groomed poet," said he, "can not write a song of the people, by the people, and for the people. There must have been mud about the roots of a pond lily."

In June (1876) a letter came and she ran to the pine

woods to read it—"trembling like a girl of sixteen." She wanted to be alone to thank God over and over for her Robin Adair. He had written "The Silent Victors" in the law office, and by invitation of a committee had read it at Newcastle on the afternoon of Memorial Day—

"What meed of tribute can the poet pay
The Soldiers, but to trail the ivy-vine
Of idle rhyme above their graves to-day?"

In imagination she had seen the dusty twenty miles he had traveled to Newcastle—he had ridden half-way on horseback and had walked the remainder. And she had seen the beautiful oak grove in the cemetery where the exercises were held, where the young poet for the first time had stepped before the public on a national holiday. She had heard the band play the sweet variations of the old Scottish air,

"Had seen his trembling hand—
Tears in his eyelids stand
To greet his native land—
Robin Adair."

"I am so proud of you—my hero," she wrote; "you are worthy the laurels you have won, and more, from the stingy world. Had I my way the world would be a flower garden. Fragrant blossoms would pave the pathway your willing feet would tread to fame. How I wish I might have been present to witness your success! There would have been one soul of that crowd whose joy would have reached your own and whispered the words I could not speak. God has given you gifts He bestows on few of His children. Your words go straight to the heart. I am proud and happy in your love."

"If I were not so wretchedly impecunious," Riley wrote in November, 1876, "I would come to you in the disguise of a rich uncle from the golden Americas." In the absence of pounds sterling he sent a letter. Dear old Uncle Sam, with "the precious mite of a three-cent stamp had made communication of lovers possible." Referring to a new name he had given her, he said, "There is something crisp and hearty about it. I feel your presence with me, and will all winter.

"I sent to Longfellow an imitation of his own style entitled 'In the Dark,' and after the method of what I consider his finest poem, 'The Day is Done.' Are you familiar with it? If not look it up. When you find it, study it closely, and then compare my verses with it, and see if they are not really a clever imitation in language, theme, similes, and so forth. I will send you the poem when it appears; I know you will like it, for you were in my mind all the time I was composing it, and I have no doubt that truant soul of yours was with my own."

As was the rage in those old days of love, there was an ample exchange of photographs and tin-types. Like other poets, Riley sent verse with his portrait, the "ghost of a face," said he, in "Lines in a Letter Enclosing a Picture." There went with them also many cheery words for the girl with the hectic bloom on her cheek:—

"I send you the shadowy ghost of a face
To haunt you forever—with eyes
That look in your own with the tenderest grace—
Affectionate art can devise;
And had they the power to sparkle and speak
In the spirit of smiles and tears,
The rainbow of love would illumine your cheek
And banish the gloom that appears.

"The lips would unlock with the key of a kiss
And the jewels of speech would confess
A treasure of love that is richer than this
Poor pencil of mine may express;
O sweeter than bliss were the whispering things
I'd breathe, and your answering sighs
Would hold Cupid on quivering wings
In a pause of exultant surprise."

In one letter she enclosed the picture of her beautiful hand holding a fan. "I send you the shadow of my hand," she wrote; "it was made on a wager, one day in 1875." Riley had seen the picture, a tin-type (it will be remembered), the previous summer when he and McClanahan had raved over its beauty. Interest in it had not diminished. She had twined a ribbon and a tress of her brown hair around it. His chum could never say enough about the beauty of her hair. Prior to receiving her letter, Riley had written his poem, "Her Beautiful Hands." He had kept the incident of its origin a secret; indeed, throughout life it pleased his fancy to keep it locked in "the round-tower of his heart." It was the hand of his ideal:

"Marvelous—wonderful—beautiful hands!
They can coax roses to bloom in the strands
Of your brown tresses; and ribbons will twine,
Under mysterious touches of thine
Into such knots as entangle the soul
And fetter the heart under such a control
As only the strength of my love understands—
My passionate love for your beautiful hands."

The lock of hair was kept among manuscripts in his trunk. Once afterward when rummaging among by-gones he chanced to see this "wisp of sunshine," as he called it. As the girl of the pine woods had married his adorable chum—for that, after all, was the way it

happened—there came the suggestion for a poem, “A Tress of Hair”:

“Her features—keep them fair,
Dear Lord, but let her lips not quite forget
The love they kindled once is gilding yet
This tress of hair.”

A British poet sings of the unsolved riddle of existence—why the bird pipes in the woods—why the owl sends down the twilight—why the rocks stand still—why the clouds fly—why the oak groans—why the willows sigh?

“How you are you? Why I am I?
Who will riddle me the *how* and the *why*?”

Such is the quandary that rises in the mind when one reflects on the poet-lover and the “Golden Girl.” Why should their love end in the sad—the sweet—the strange No More? At first he suffered from *her* silence, then she suffered from *his* silence, and then their suffering was mutual. Out of that suffering came several poems—three that were strangely sad and sadly sweet—“Say Something to Me”—“An Empty Song”—and “Song of Parting.”

“The air is full of tender prophecy,” she wrote one Sunday evening. “‘Say Something to Me’ went straight to my heart and found an answering thrill for all the pleading tenderness of the words your gracious pencil dropped, though my lips could not speak. I cried when I read it, as once I cried in the darkness that veiled our clasped hands and passion-burdened eyes from the world when you whispered to me, ‘If I Should Die To-night.’ You remember it—the darkness that had grown compassionate and pitiful, and veiled the whole world

in gloom to give us an hour of happiness more bright
than hour of daylight ever knew, an hour

‘In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world .
Was lighted.’

“I can find no words to tell you of my love, how I treasure your lightest word, for my stumbling pencil is devoid of all the subtle power that hangs about your own. I can not trace the thoughts that wake into newer life at your touch, and set my happy answering heart aglow, for before my stupid fingers have well begun their task, other and yet other thoughts have overthrown the kingdom of the first and left me but the sturdy words, I LOVE YOU. Tell me—My Prophet—is that future surely coming to us, whose brilliancy fell in a golden glory that covered up all the gloom on that ‘day of pure gold’ of which you write?—

‘Something in our eyes made tears to glisten;
But they were not sad.’ ”

Then followed “An Empty Song.” As signified in the poem, she was the *sun* of his heart but she could not shine on both sides of it. He might have said as he did say in another poem that

“She was the dazzling Shine—I, the dark Shade—
And we did mingle like to these, and thus,
Together, made
The perfect summer, pure and glorious.”

But there was a *shadow* of the heart, “issue of its own substance,” he phrased it, which she could not lighten. Her radiance, all-powerful in beauty and love, could not scatter the night of the soul.

And then the “Song of Parting.” The full signifi-

cance of the poem is seen in the fact that it was, in spirit, a joint production; the lover speaks in the first and second stanzas, the "Badger Girl," as he sometimes called his sweetheart, in the last. In the original there are such lines as—

"Do not weep—for tears are vain—
Little mists of foolish rain.

"Say farewell, and let me go—
Since the Fates have planned
That your love can only grow
In a richer land."

Before we say farewell, the "Badger Girl" shall have a few words more. She shall tell a little more clearly, though painfully, her own story. We have her lover's story in his poems. Referring to the shadow on his heart, and to the poems of that period, Riley said, "I wrote with my heart's own blood." He was not alone in his despair. She, too, wrote with her heart's own blood. Surely she knew herself better than her lover or any one else knew her.

At their first meeting there were of course revelations for each, which the poor power of letters had failed to impart. Riley deftly concealed his sadness at the thought of her declining health. "She was fragile as a lily," he said, "delicate as a snowdrop." But there were other considerations besides health.

"Each had another life they longed to meet
Without which life, their own were incomplete."

The meeting did not reveal that other life. Whether it would have been revealed had her health been restored is mere conjecture. There was hope of her recovery, but it was hope with a shadow. One thing

is clear, if we accept the testimony of each, their meeting did not diminish their love. They talked of the paths into which their feet had strayed, how they had walked on and on, dreaming, hoping that "one little corner of the curtain that hid the future from their eyes would lift and discover to each the life he longed to live. God's mysterious hand had led them and was still to lead them on."

Henceforth their letters were candid to a degree that excites sympathy. "Will you understand me I wonder," the lover wrote some few weeks later, "if I tell you that I fear I am going to make you unhappy? Will you understand me when I tell you that, should the premonition prove true, your unhappiness would be my own? I fear you never will understand just what a strange paradox I am. I hardly know myself. But you must not think too kindly of me. Not that I do not deserve love, but rather because all the affection I can offer in return is as vain as it is wild and fervid. If I could take your hand and hold it as I say these words, you would know how deeply sad and earnest and most truthful I am in this belief. My life has been made up of disappointments and despairs. This is no fancy with me. It is bitter, bitter truth. I have learned to bear it well. I have learned to expect but little else. I ache, but I grope on smiling in the dark. You are not strong as I am strong. Your tears would overflow your path and sweep you back. And you must not know what I endure. God made you to be glad; so you must not lean too far out of the sunshine to help me. I am not wholly selfish as I struggle down here in the gloom, but I am tired and so worn I can but grasp your hand if proffered—only don't—don't. Just hail me from the brink with cheery words. That

will be best for you—and as for me—why, I will be stronger knowing I have dragged no bright hopes down with my poor drowning ones. My whole being goes out from me, and I am calling to you through the great distance that divides us. Do you hear? God bless you, little girl, and keep you always glad as you are good. You must write me at once. I dream now that your face is drooped a little, and I lift it with my hand, and it is bright and beautiful. So, set it heavenward and where the sunlight falls, and I will see its glancing smiles flash back, and that will help me more than words will say.”

“There is an ache in your heart,” Riley wrote again, “which can never be conquered or tamed down. Like a prisoned bird, it beats its wings against the bars and makes your life a discord.” He had discord in his own life; to wed that to more discord meant disaster that was not all personal. He would shield his sweetheart from such a destiny. He could say with the hapless Poe, “Toward you there is no room in my soul for any other sentiment than devotion. It is fate only which I accuse. It is my own unhappy nature.”

“O, how right you are,” she answered; “I shiver with the jarring sense of discord as I write. I have so many faults, so much pride; yet I must be earnest with you; I must say all—if you hate me for it.

I am digging my warm heart
Till I find its coldest part;
I am digging wide and low,
Farther than a spade can go.

I am different, so different from your ideal, your ‘Pearl of Pearls.’ One day I am satisfied with all the world and want to take it to my arms and caress it—the next,

I feel sure it is full of injustice and misery underneath its smiling exterior, and I descend into my ice-house of rebellion. Then I listen to 'soft nothings' with radiant face and sparkling eyes, smile into faces that smile down into my own, do a happy careless laugh to perfection, when flat things are said in the way of compliment that smack of having been committed to memory in some long ago when some one fairer than I had inspired their utterance; and then a miserable conceit takes hold of me like death and I say to myself, 'I am in shallow water and must wade because these people know no deeper soundings'—and I pity them, I who so much need forbearance myself."

"I seem not to make you understand me," she writes at another time. "My life is empty and purposeless or has been—and yet underneath it all there pulses a great, strong, unconquerable passion for something higher and better, something that your words make me dare hope is almost within my reach. A sense there is of being cramped into a narrower space of thought and action than God intended. A numbness, too, and unconsciousness and inability to use with intrepidity the few gifts I might have had; but they have so long lain dormant that they are useless and withered as a limb long bandaged from the air and sunshine. I dread to be misunderstood. I have a horror of miscellaneous pity. But you seem to understand me better than the rest; you encourage me to think that this element of—well, I can not name it—this inside kernel, this knaggy knarl would have made me infinitely more worthy of you had I been rightly, properly kneaded in the first place, for I believe I was put together like a Chinese puzzle and am at present wrong-side-out or up-

side-down or t'other-side-to and need but some skillful hand that understands the machinery to put me right. I think there is a secret spring, if one could only find it, that if suddenly touched would immediately set me straight, like a stove-pipe hat,—the theatre hat, made of springs, don't you know. You know what I mean—you have seen them.

“I know you would not give me hope and aspirations if you imagined they would come to naught. I can but fresh courage take from your words and honest convictions. Do not wonder that my hand trembles as I write, that my heart bounds again with joy—a great joy that you think me capable of something better than the poor fluttering moth that I seem to be.”

It is noteworthy that the Little Woman *first* reached the conviction that they could never marry. Usually insight and foresight are attributed to man. He is wisdom. Woman is love. But love is wisdom also when lodged in the heart of a Dame Durden. By combining wisdom and love, Dickens made her one of the adorable women of fiction—and it was lovingly complimentary in Riley to give his sweetheart the name:

“My Little Woman, of you I sing
With a fervor all divine.”

It was said at the beginning of the chapter, that Riley was in love with an ideal. It may now be said that there was an uncommon measure of the ideal in the “Golden Girl,” and that her influence like an angelic presence remained with the poet through the “ten prolific years” that succeeded their correspondence—the decade that saw the light dawn on his best work.

“Do you suppose I would spoil my ideal by getting married?” The remark is attributed to Frances Wil-



HER BEAUTIFUL HAND

From a tintype taken when the Golden Girl was nineteen.
Inspiration for the poem: "Her Beautiful Hands"



WHEN THE POET WAS TWENTY-FIVE

lard. Whatever may be said of its authenticity, the thought was certainly not far from the heart of the "Golden Girl" when she penned to Riley the following:

"My Dear Friend, the dearest friend I have on earth, believe me when I tell you your letter has touched me deeper than I have words to express. I am stretching my hands out to you. Take them, crush them till the pain deadens the terrible anguish and pain at my heart. I am coming to you one moment—

'One moment that I may forget
The trials waiting for me yet.'

There is a great, yawning dark gulf between us—a hopeless one. You know not, you can not, dare to guess it nor can I tell you more now. We are like children groping in the dark. It is as impossible to bridge the gulf or in any way lessen the distance, as it is for me to stifle the moan that rises to my lips when I think of it. That gulf can never be crossed. Mine is the fault, mine alone. I cross to this side, but you can not follow."

"A brave soul is a thing all things serve," she quotes in another letter and then goes on to marvel at a strange world, hardly knowing what to make of it, or herself, or her lover, or any one. God had some special work for her when He created her, but finding some other hands perhaps more willing, He left her with a half-awakened consciousness of what she had lost—no object in life to bid her clamber up the long hill whose rugged steeps then echoed with the footsteps of her lover, for "you," to use her own words, "are slowly, surely making your way with noble energy to the top of the mountain. As you pass me on the path that glitters with the reflex of tears rained from many weary eyes that weep no more forever, you recognize the task before you as you never did before, perhaps, and pity me as I sit silent,

discouraged, mastered by the first obstacle at the foot of the hill."

Fragile—aimless and hopeless as she thought, perhaps after all her influence would follow him. What could he do, she once asked, without the heart of woman? Her answer to her own question was significant.

"What could he do indeed? A weak, white girl
Held all his heartstrings in her small white hands;
His hopes, and power, and majesty were hers,
And not his own."

Feeling thus, a new thought was born in her heart—a thought that God had meant one day to create her and her lover for each other. "To you," she wrote, "God gave a noble manhood, genius to love and appreciate His holy handiwork, and having well in mind the woman He should send you by and by to make your earth a heaven, He gave you a heart as gentle and kindly as ever allotted to earth's creatures, and set you pure and stainless to await my coming.

"Alas! some envious hand sullied the brightness of the picture and in punishment God sent me unfinished, far away from you into the maelstrom of the world, and left me groping blindly, longing for the treasure I had lost yet never known. And a dreary sense of the same bitter loss makes you long for 'the one woman on earth'—makes you grieve for the incompleteness of her who should have been your ideal, the imperfection of the gem that you hoped to find perfect. God sent us apart and has kept us apart. Will we ever meet? I am sorry for you, sorry for myself. I can love you—love you as no mortal yet has loved you when I remember all I might have been for your sake—love you with a passion

God has no time to tone down." With this she asks of her lover in a closing paragraph, if he had read the *Two Destinies*, and then signs herself, "Yours always."

In a brief note a few days later, she fears the clouds she and her lover thought would drop in dew might scatter snow. She wished him to know with what a masterly hand he had kindled her "into fire—heap of ashes that she was—a fire, however, inseparable in its nature from herself, quickening nothing, lighting nothing, doing no service, idly burning away."

"A sad story," her friends were heard to say, and doubtless others who read it for the first time will say the same. But let them not rue it as an exceptional fate. True love leads over a rough and thorny way.

Who believes that the influence of this gifted being ended with death?—she who "could lay her fevered cheek against the weeping window pane, close her eyes, and hear in the dripping rain the tread of trembling fairy feet on the roof?"—she

"Who felt sometimes the wish across the mind
Rush like a rocket tearing up the skies?"

Dear Little Woman! the fire of your love is still burning—but not *idly* burning. Your lover jeweled songs with your tears. The clouds did after all drop dew.

"From his flying quill there dripped
Such music on his manuscript
That they who listen to his words
May close their eyes and dream the birds
Are twittering on every hand
A language they can understand."

By smiting upon the chords of the poet's heart with might, the Little Woman contributed to literature the immortal "Fame," according to his father, the greatest

poem the son ever wrote. Alas, for the Little Woman! it did not augur fame for her.

If the reader desires to know how the "Golden Girl's" courtship ended historically, he will find it in a closing chapter of *Bleak House*, with a little shade to color it from *Enoch Arden*. After a grievous misunderstanding, McClanahan, her former love, "the wreckless, lovable boy with the good heart and extravagant ideas," returned and made amends for his absence and seeming neglect. Unlike the Tennysonian narrative, she had not married in the meantime, although she had been ardently loved by Riley. True to what befell in *Bleak House*, Riley assumed the rôle of the Guardian, restored his friend to the old place in her love, and consented to their wedding, "soothingly, like the gentle rustling of the leaves; genially, like the ripening weather; radiantly and beneficently, like the sunshine." So they were wed.

"And merrily rang the bells,
And merrily ran the years,"

two transient, happy years, a steady decline in the bride's health—and then a grave.

There was truly a *song* in the parting. All that the future could bestow was welcome now. That Riley worshiped the fair hand seemed for a moment a mistake—and thus the poem "Say Farewell and Let Me Go." But it was not a life-long good-by. There was but one remove from her to the Muse of Poesy. Indeed, as the years came with their opulence of joy and sorrow, the memory of her became a sacred presence. When he and his friend McClanahan talked of her, there was pathos in his voice that others never heard and few, had they heard, could understand. The memory of her kept him from "a selfish grave." It was

“The one bright thing to save
His youthful life in the wilds of Time.”

The distance between her and the Muse of Song was so slight that he often—more seriously than his friends suspected—referred to his favorite goddess as the Little Woman, styling himself the Little Man beside her in his bark, on their poetic way. The fates had woven her into the warp and woof of his destiny. She was the “golden-haired, seraphic child,” whose flying form was ever plying between his “little boat” and the driving clouds. His own version of the Muse seems a dancing phantom. Nevertheless, she was the Queen of “the rosebud garden of girls.” She was the “beautiful immortal figure,” she was the “Empress of his listening Soul,”

“The Parian phantomette, with head atip
And twinkling fingers dusting down the dew”

that glittered on the leaves of simple things,—he, the wooing Jucklet standing knee-deep in the grass, waiting for the fragrant shower.

Thinking to disarm the critics, Riley called his portrait of the Muse a monstrosity of rhyme, but time has long since relieved it of that imputation. “The phantom left me at sea,” said he a score of years after he had come under the mesmeric spell. “After I had written the lines they worried me a great deal. I did not fully comprehend them then, nor do I now.” In “An Adjustable Lunatic” where the lines appear, he says his “mind was steeped in dreamy languor, and yet peopled with a thousand shadowy fancies that came from chaotic hiding-places and mingled in a revelry of such riotous extravagance it seemed a holiday of phantom thought.” The music of the Muse rippled mystically from her harp. It was the despair of mortals—

. "the pulse of invoiced melodies
Timing the raptured sense to some refrain
That knows nor words, nor rhymes, nor euphonies."

It belonged to that higher region of poetry of which Longfellow talked when Riley called to see him at the Craigie Mansion. "It is too delicate," said Longfellow, "for the emotions and aspirations of the human heart—too fragile for the touch of analysis. The thought like the exquisite odor of a flower, losing all palpable embodiment, is veiled and often lost in the mist of its own spiritual loveliness."

It was just this impalpable something that Riley saw as in a trance or dream but could not express. Somewhere, with unseen wings brushing past him, a lawn bespangled with flowers unrolled beneath his feet. On his ear fell a storm of gusty music,

"And when at last it lulled and died,
I stood aghast and terrified.
I shuddered and shut my eyes,
And still could see and feel aware
Some mystic presence waited there;
And staring with a dazed surprise,
I saw a creature so divine
That never subtle thought of mine
May reproduce to inner sight
So fair a vision of delight.

"A syllable of dew that drips
From out a lily's laughing lips
Could not be sweeter than the word
I listened to, yet never heard.—
For, oh, the woman hiding there
Within the shadows of her hair,
Spake to me in an undertone
So delicate, my soul alone
But understood it as a moan
Of some weak melody of wind
A heavenward breeze had left behind."

There was a tracery of trees in the sky near the horizon toward which the dreamer gazed, a background of dusky verdure for the vision of womanly loveliness that stood beautiful and statuesque before it. She loomed there in the twilight as if the spirit-hand of Angelo had chiseled her to life complete:—

“And I grew jealous of the dusk,
To see it softly touch her face,
As lover-like with fond embrace
It folded round her like a husk:
But when the glitter of her hand,
Like wasted glory beckoned me,
My eyes grew blurred and dull and dim—
My vision failed—I could not see—
I could not stir—I could not stand,
Till quivering in every limb,
I flung me prone, as though to swim
The tide of grass whose waves of green
Went rolling ocean-wide between
My helpless shipwrecked heart and her
Who claimed me for a worshiper.”

CHAPTER XV

LIGHT AND COUNSEL FROM THE WISE

A STOUT champion of scientific thought, whose habit was to deal with the elemental truth of things, adorns English literature with a memorable picture of the game of human life—the game which has been played for untold ages, every man and woman of us being one of the two players in a game of his or her own. “The world is a chess-board,” he says; “the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side—a calm strong angel who is playing with us for love as we say—is hidden from us. We know that his play is always fair, just and patient. But also we know to our cost that he never overlooks a mistake, or makes the smallest allowance for ignorance. To the man who plays well, the highest stakes are paid, with that sort of overflowing generosity with which the strong delight in strength. And the one who plays ill is checkmated—without haste, but without remorse.”

An inspiring conception, provided one sees it as Riley saw it—a *thing divine*. Without that, clouds and mountains, the stars spinning through space were but vanishing dust and vapor. Back of physical splendor and terror, below, within and above the law of Nature, this side and beyond the Calm Angel, the poet saw the sublime miracle of the Infinite All-in-All, of which the chessboard of the world is the manifestation.

Education is learning the rules of this mighty game—man in loving communication with Nature and the God of Nature: “the study of men and their ways—the fashioning of the affections and of the will,” that he may live in harmony with universal laws. Not an easy task, not *now* idly dreaming in an empty day. Riley has had the *vision* of his mission: he has chosen a passenger for his “little boat,” the lively Muse of Song. How will he play the mighty game? Some have said he played it foolishly, but they say this in ignorance of the facts.

“As in a game ov cards,” his friend Josh Billings once remarked, “so in the game ov life, we must play what iz dealt tew us; and the glory konsists not so much in winning as in playing a poor hand well.” A college training and superior opportunities of culture were not dealt to the Poet of the People. Sometimes he whined over his lot; sometimes he talked back. Nevertheless he became human and lovable. He played a poor hand well.

Among the first things he did after his *vision* was to seek light and counsel from eminent litterateurs—and it took courage to do it. Distinguished authors in their books had been profitable company, but to approach them directly concerning himself was different. Never then, and seldom, if ever, in his maturer years, did he “run the risk of becoming proud of his powers and abilities.” He was modest. His timidity was painful. To write about genius was to assume that he *had* genius, and of this he was not at all certain. Nor was he certain any one could tell him. At the last it was—“Trust in Providence and his own efforts.”

Then, too, it was perhaps a burden on older authors which young writers should not inflict. It is one of the

penalties of eminence, Reynolds had said, to be obliged, as a matter of courtesy, to give opinions upon the attempts of the dull. Mark Twain would not do it. "No," he wrote in the old "Galaxy" magazine, where Riley first learned to love him, "no, I will not venture any opinion whatever as to the literary merit of a young writer's productions. The public is the only critic whose judgment is worth anything at all. If I honestly and conscientiously praise his manuscript, I might thus help to inflict a lingering and pitiless bore upon the public; if I honestly and conscientiously condemn it, I might thus rob the world of an undeveloped Dickens or Shakespeare."

Writing the eminent for encouragement was the rage among aspiring Hoosiers in the seventies. There was an occasional skeptic, who considered it a sleeveless errand—"whistling jigs to a mile-stone"—but the current sentiment favored it. Aldrich, when a young man, had received a letter from Hawthorne warmly praising his early poems, and had kept "the pearl of great price" among his autographic treasures to the end of his days. Mark Twain had been warmly complimented on his first book, in a letter from Oliver Wendell Holmes. Henry George had a letter from John Stuart Mill, which sent him to his study and to fame. Longfellow had been signally helped at the age of eighteen. Jared Sparks had shown him that "his style was too ambitious; his thoughts and reflections were good, but wanted maturity and betrayed a young writer."

Among the first of the "rising Hoosiers" to receive one of the coveted letters was the Schoolmaster, Lee O. Harris. His friends encouraged him. That man was a poet, they thought, who—

. . . . "saw the Morn arise
 Like Venus from a sea of mist,
 And blushes redden all the skies
 When Night and Morning kissed."

Authors were certain to take notice of such verse. Whittier wrote of the "rhythmical sweetness" in the teacher's poems. Trowbridge thought "they showed a sufficient mastery of language to warrant obedience to any literary impulse." Longfellow liked "Sunset Behind the Clouds" and suggested a few changes with the hope that the young pedagogue would not think him hypercritical: "the real merit of the poem made him speak frankly."

Maurice Thompson, more ambitious than the rest, sought counsel in foreign lands, and received the following from Victor Hugo: "Young man, hold your head right! The stars are not really in clear water. Those are shams. Look up always as you do now. *Labor Limae—sic itur ad astra*. (Labor to the end: such is the way to immortality.) I reach across the ocean to you. I hope the young men coming after me will do strongly what I have feebly begun."

After a restless period of hesitation and deliberation, Riley wrought his courage up to the sticking point. That done, the rest was easy. First of all, he would write his patron saint—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And that was to be expected. "When a boy," he said, "I giggled on hearing the name 'Longfellow' but it soon became positively poetical and musical to me." When quite a young man he considered it "a liberal education for a poet just to read Longfellow." At the poet's grave he said, "The touch of his hand was a prayer and his speech a blessed psalm." As early as 1868, at young

Riley's suggestion, the *Greenfield Commercial*, an obscure county paper, followed the poet on his tour through Europe, there appearing as late as October such locals as, "Longfellow at last accounts was doing the Paris picture galleries."

Prior to writing Longfellow, Riley had had the letter from Donald G. Mitchell about a "very graceful poem," with the accompanying hope that he would "not be discouraged from further exercise of his literary talent." This was followed with one from the *Danbury News*: "Let me say," wrote the editor, "that you are a good writer and a promising one, and bye and bye, if you keep on improving as you have, you will acquire what is everything to the scribe—fame; and this secured your writing will command remuneration of your own figuring. At the moment it is up-hill work. Perseverance is your best ammunition. More wounded than killed in the great battle of pen-and-ink."

One "dapperling of comfort" from Lee O. Harris, Riley remembered in love long after the applause of the world had become uninteresting. "Dear old friend," wrote the Schoolmaster in October, 1876, "and fellow convict on the chain gang of phantasy. I have taken upon myself the task of trying to find a publisher." (Collaborating with B. S. Parker, the literary fledglings were feebly attempting something in book form. All three "confessed to two of the oddest infirmities in the world": one, that they had no idea of time; the other, that they had no idea of money.) "Unless we do find a publisher," Harris continues, "I do not see what we can do. Parker has no money and I expect you have about half as much as he has and I have less than both of you. Your 'August' is good;

'The forest stands in silence, drinking deep
Its purple wine of shade,'

was written by a true poet."

Other testimonials have passed into oblivion, but that one stands the test of time. When recalling it, Riley was once reminded of what Emma Abbott said to her friend Reed. The young singer had been stranded on the road and Reed had paid her fare to the next town. "Myron Reed," she said, calling at his home in the noontide of her fame, "I have come to thank you for the ten dollars you loaned me. Ten dollars, when one must have it, is worth more than one hundred thousand dollars when one does not need it." So Riley thought of the little postscript of praise from the Schoolmaster.

Having written two letters to eminent authors, Riley was suddenly confronted with the loss of their addresses. It was the dawning of his lifelong distress over his inability to find things he had so carefully put away—"A place for everything," he would repeat when hopelessly seeking letters in his desk, "*a place for everything and everything some place else.*"

"I should be handled by the Grand Jury," said he, "for not knowing the address of Longfellow." But he did not know it; hence the following to the Schoolmaster, who was then teaching in Lewisville, Indiana:

Greenfield, November 20, 1876.

Dear Harris—

I intended to take down the addresses of those two celebrities while you were here. Will you furnish them, please, by mail and any others you may know of?

I have my letters "calked and primed" and only await your kindness.

Yours,

J. W. R.

The addresses (answered his Schoolmaster) are, Henry W. Longfellow, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and John T. Trowbridge, Arlington, Massachusetts.

Having addressed the envelopes, Riley hastened to the post-office. "I approached the letter box with trembling," said he,—“held my letter in my hand, hesitating and turning it over, wondering whether I had omitted something or had written something I should not write. I had enclosed three poems, ‘In the Dark,’ ‘A Destiny’ (now entitled ‘A Dreamer’), and ‘If I Knew What Poets Know.’ Should I have enclosed others, or were they my best? I did not know.” The letter he dropped in the box was as follows:

Greenfield, Indiana, November 20, 1876.

Mr. Henry W. Longfellow—

Dear Sir: I find the courage to address you as I would a friend since by your works you have proven yourself a friend to the world. I would not, however, intrude upon you now did I not feel that you alone could assist me.

For a few weeks I have been gaining some praise for poems written with no higher ambition than to please myself and friends; but as many of them have been copied through the country and the fascination of writing has grown upon me, I would like to enter the literary field in earnest, were I assured I possessed real talent. I have sometimes thought so, and again have been very doubtful in that regard. About two years since I sent a poem to *Hearth and Home*, and it was received and published with illustrations. I had *given* them the poem, but they paid me for it, a small though handsome sum to me, and I was encouraged to send another, which I did, but the journal was just suspending as it reached them. My manuscript was returned, with a kindly note from Donald G. Mitchell, the retiring editor, advising me to continue the exercise of what he was pleased to term “my literary talent.”

I enclose for your inspection two or three of my better efforts, hoping to elicit from you a word of comment and advice. If without merit or promise, your telling me so will make me happy, and if the contrary, encouragement will give me strength to do as you may be pleased to advise.

With profound respect, I remain your humble servant
and admirer, J. W. RILEY.

Having mailed the letter there followed a ten days' suspense. Time hung heavily over Greenfield. "Ten days!" said Riley, drawling out the words; "it—was—ten—weeks. Every hour I grew more doubtful of an answer from Longfellow. I was told the last thing he wanted to do was to give an opinion of other people's poems. My head was full of suspicions—my letter might not reach him—he might be sick, and so forth. The opiate for my perturbation was 'The Spanish Student.' It was soothing to read it. I was in love and like the Student confronted with the awful mystery of Life."

There was another cause for his perturbation. He was wrestling with his new poem, "Fame." Many waves broke upon the "seashore of his mind." One night

"The loud and ponderous mace of Time
Knocked at the golden portals of the day,"

before he slept. Recalling the night, he talked of phantoms that filled the air, and how the silence was haunted by the ghosts of sound. There were "strange cracks and tickings, the rustling of garments that have no substance in them, and the tread of dreadful feet, that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow." He had a vision of fame, but it did not "make

the night glorious with its smile." What he saw was the fame of a man

"Who journeyed on through life, unknown,
Without one friend to call his own;
No sympathetic sob or sigh
Of trembling lips—no sorrowing eye
Looked out through tears to see him die."

It seems relevant to note here that "Fame" was not written in a night. There was time for suggestions from the "Golden Girl." "The poem," he said, "required the revision and reconstruction of weeks." Changes occurred up to the very month of its publication in the *Earlhamite* of Earlham College, February, 1877.

Riley had been blessed with the *vision* of his mission, but poets, like other mortals, if they do their work, must have their crust of bread. It was literally true that he had less money than his Schoolmaster who had none—for he was in debt. In his extremity, he had decided to replenish his exchequer by favorably answering another call from the Graphic Company, when, like a breath from Araby, came a letter from the "Golden Girl," which made it more than a mere fancy of hers that she held in her "weak white hands" his hopes and fortune. Gaunt starvation must be vanquished, but not by wasting time with the "Graphics." The wandering desire for travel and money was fatal. In those doubtful weeks she gave him courage. "Her mirth," he said, "was like a zephyr challenging the East Wind." As she saw it, the new poet could do anything. "I say," she wrote, rallying him on his fertility of resources, "did you ever teach school or sell sewing machines?" Then she grew serious; her love "reached over the endless sea of

Cambridge, Sept. 5.
1878.

My Dear Sir,

I have received the poems
you were kind enough to
send me, and have read
the lyric pieces with much
pleasure.

"The Flying Islands of
the Night" I have not yet
read, being very busy just
now with many things.
As you say I may keep

it, I will do so, and read
it carefully at some favora-
ble moments.

The other poems I
return, at your desire,
and am, my Dear Sir,

Yours very truly
Henry M. Loring Fellow.

P.S. Among these, being
the one that pleased me
as much as any, if not
more than any, was
"The Iron Horse."

absence." She wanted to feel the presence of the hand that had fashioned so many beautiful messages. "And you are going away with the 'Graphics'? I am sorry.

'I can't quite make it clear,
It seems so horrid queer.'

I wish I might whisper to you all the rare diamonds of thought Hope flings at my feet to-day."

While struggling with his new poem and doubting in himself what to do for a living, Riley was prompted to call at the post-office and this is what he found:

Cambridge, Nov. 30, 1876.

My Dear Sir:

Not being in the habit of criticising the productions of others, I can not enter into any minute discussion of the merits of the poems you send me.

I can only say in general terms that I have read them with great pleasure, and think they show the true poetic faculty and insight.

The only criticism I shall make is on your use of the word *prone* in the thirteenth line of "Destiny." *Prone* means face-downward. You meant to say *supine*, as the context shows.

I return the printed pieces, as you may want them for future use, and am, my Dear Sir, with all good wishes,

Yours very truly,

HENRY W. LONGFELLOW.

But one result could follow. To borrow his own words, he was "in a perfect hurricane of delight." He walked away from the post-office, not through the streets of Greenfield, but "through some enchanted city, where the pavements were of air; where all the rough sounds of a stirring town were softened into gentle music; where everything was happy; where there was no distance and no time."

"Gently his pathway turned from night;
The hills swung open to the light;
And on his fortune's farther side
He saw the hilltops glorified."

The hour had arrived for that old faithful clock, the *Greenfield Democrat*, to strike again. Under the caption, *Our Poet*, the editor printed the Longfellow letter and commented upon "the poetic merits of our young fellow townsman, James W. Riley. We are gratified to learn that his poetic talent has not only been appreciated by his friends at home, but has received the recognition of America's most eminent poet. The *Democrat* is proud of having one among us whose brilliant future is almost assured, and by way of encouragement reminds our young friend that

'Poets have undoubted right to claim,
If not the greatest, the most lasting name.'

The Schoolmaster rejoiced that his "winter of discontent was made glorious summer by this *sun of the Muses*. Do you recall the days," he asks Riley, "we used to spend together under the beech trees at the old schoolhouse, when we were several years younger than now, the days we strayed like the breeze among the blossoms?"

'When Hope clung feeding, like a bee,
And Love and Life went a-Maying
With Nature, Faith and Poesy?'

He then warns Riley that Pegasus is frequently refractory. "You may have," he added, "a whole week of jubilant exultation—a week of constant dashing hither and thither upon your winged steed—sometimes among the clouds, sometimes above the stars—a hand upon the rein and

he obeys, a touch with the heel and he flies, until the whole earth lies beneath you, and all its inexhaustible wealth of beautiful imagery is at your command and then—a balk—a halt—a fall—and Helicon a mole-hill—Hippocrene a mud puddle—and Pegasus a mule, braying for his fodder.”

His friend, B. S. Parker, sent congratulations, but warned Riley not to “feel too much flattered, but to proceed discreetly, to cultivate the acquaintance of other distinguished and influential men of letters.” Nor must he “feel greatly grieved or disheartened if some should snub him.” Parker had had gratifying letters, but “they had done him no further good than the momentary bliss they had occasioned.”

It is a great event, it has been said, for a young writer to receive his first letter from a great man. “He can never receive letters enough from famous men afterward to obliterate that one, or dim the memory of the pleasant surprise it was and the gratification it gave him. Lapse of time can not make it commonplace or cheap.” As to the memory of it, this was true of Riley. The Longfellow letter was his pearl of great price, but, unlike Aldrich, he did not caress it as an autographic treasure to the end of his days. He carried it in his “reticule” a year or so, then laid it away and saw it no more. Again it was—“Trust in Providence and in his own efforts.” The conviction was borne in upon him that there is but one straight road to success and that is merit. Capacity lacked not opportunity. It could not forever remain undiscovered. Letters from the distinguished never had made a young writer great and never could. God would not have it so. Each writer, with fear and trembling, had to work out his own lit-

erary salvation. Some have thought that had Longfellow written Riley that his poems were without merit or promise, his literary ambitions would have come suddenly to an end. Reporters have made him say: "I made up my mind if Longfellow said 'No,' I would quit all that kind of thing forever." He never said it. One adverse criticism could not have overcome his native tendency. The impulse to write was so powerful that escape from it was inconceivable. As late as 1879, while painting a sign to earn his daily bread, this impelling force was sufficient to bring him down the ladder to write a poem.

Among other lessons he learned from the letter was the value one should attach to words. Henceforth he would study their use and abuse. When his poem, "A Vision of Summer," "warmed him through and through with tropical delight," he lay *supine*—thanks to Longfellow—not *prone*.

"On grassy swards, where the skies, like eyes,
Look lovingly back to mine."

Almost immediately he made use of the letter to thaw out the icy East. He wrote and illustrated a "*serio-humorous* poem," "The Funny Little Fellow," and sent it to Scribner's. He felt certain his illustrations were as good as the average found in "Bric-a-Brac" of that monthly. It was a good idea to combine both poet and artist. "I backed up my ability with my Longfellow letter," said he. "You can imagine my chagrin when I received their 'Respectfully Declined.'"

The *first* letter to Longfellow was a legitimate performance, but the second, in Riley's own words, "was unwarranted and inexcusable. I made the mistake most writers make; having received a good letter, I

must, forsooth, have another. They say Longfellow was grim when they came to steal his time. Grim? When maidens came with their manuscripts in blue velvet, and young men with carpetbags full of poems, he should have frowned till they heard Thor hurling thunder!"

Riley never could be quite penitent enough—when he grew older and realized what the infliction meant—for having been so stupid as to send another carpetbagful. To enclose "The Iron Horse" and one or two other short poems would not have been so bad, but with them to send "A Remarkable Man," "Tale of a Spider," and "Flying Islands of the Night," was a Grub-Street offense for which there was no pardon. Nevertheless, he sent them, although, as he said, "two years elapsed before I was stupid enough to do it." The following letter accompanied them, which received a prompt answer:

Greenfield, Ind., Sept. 2, 1878.

Henry W. Longfellow—

Dear Sir: Emboldened by a very kind and encouraging letter received from you some two years since, I take the liberty of enclosing to you some of my later work. And I desire again to express to you my warmest thanks for the great good both your influence and kind words have done me. While I have not been recognized by the magazines, I have a reputation in my own state of which I am proud, and through it I am not only making progress but money as well.

The poetical drama I enclose, as you will see, is without ambition, yet for all that I most certainly trust you will find in it something pleasurable. Regretting to afflict you with the additional trouble of returning the scraps, I am

Most Truly and Gratefully yours,
J. W. RILEY.

Cambridge, Sept. 5, 1878.

My Dear Sir:

I have received the poems you were kind enough to send me, and have read the lyric pieces with much pleasure.

"The Flying Islands of the Night" I have not yet read, being very busy just now with many things. As you say I may keep it, I will do so, and read it carefully at some favorable moment.

The other poems I return as you desire, and am, my
Dear Sir, Yours very truly,
HENRY W. LONGFELLOW.

P. S.—Among these poems the one that pleased me much as any, if not more than any, was "The Iron Horse."

The letter that could prompt the beautiful sonnet to Longfellow was not a mistake after all. One still hears the trees whispering to him and the winds talking with him confidently:

"His verse blooms like a flower, night and day;
Bees cluster round his rhymes; and twitterings
Of lark and swallow, in an endless May
Are mingling with the tender songs he sings."

What effect Riley's letters and poems had on Longfellow is largely conjecture. Reviewers have thought his "Possibilities" was the result. It may be true, for it is a matter of record that the sonnet was written in 1882, after Riley's call at the Craigie House in January of that year. "Come into my study," said the poet, "it is more like freedom here; we can talk and be content." At his request Riley read "Old Fashioned Roses." "Delightful! delightful!" repeated Longfellow. They talked of "our native poets and their work." Longfellow knew them all and "loved them all—even

the humblest." They talked particularly of "western characteristics and dialects and the possibilities of the West for song."

"Where are the Poets?" asks Longfellow in the sonnet;

"Perhaps there lives some dreamy boy, untaught
In schools, some graduate of the field or street,
Who shall become a master of the art,
An admiral sailing the high seas of thought,
Fearless and first, and steering with his fleet
For lands not yet laid down in any chart."

Riley never claimed to be an admiral sailing the high seas, but he was untaught of the schools. Without any chart he steered fearless and first into a new field of song. The whole of twenty years, beginning with the year of his *vision*, was a constant fight with the critics for the rights and merits of that field.

Letters from celebrities, with one exception, made little impression on him. No answer came from Whittier, but that disappointment was soon softened by the *sympathy* of Trowbridge. "Sympathizingly Yours" stayed with him to the year of his departure (1916) and Trowbridge with his four score and ten years was permitted to see the dawn of the same year.

Arlington, Mass., Dec. 1, 1876.

Mr. J. W. Riley,

Dear Sir: I recognize touches here and there in these little pieces, which indicate a good deal of fancy & sympathy—prime requisites in the writing of verse; but neither of them seems to have that original force necessary to conceive & complete a really striking poem. This may be in you yet, though your 26 years may not have enabled you—so far—to master it. With what talent these pieces show, you may undoubtedly write

pleasing and perhaps popular pieces; but to be marketable & to make its mark, poetry must nowadays be in some respect striking.

I am Sympathizingly Yours,

J. T. TROWBRIDGE.

Trowbridge as "Paul Creyton" with his popular tales for the young, had caught the attention of Greenfield several years prior to his letter to Riley. As editor of *Our Young Folks*, he drew Riley's attention to the literary significance of the Child-World. Longfellow had given but a hint of its riches. There was a call for some one to take up the theme where he left it. Some one should try his genius on childhood. Children should lisp and whisper their messages to us, tell us

"What the birds and the winds are singing
In their sunny atmosphere."

Trowbridge had also set Riley reflecting on the importance of frontier material for poetry. Some one, Trowbridge thought, should seek it in the Backwoods Enchanted, go back among old armchairs, old-fashioned spinning-wheels and dismantled looms, search among dusty cobwebs, find

"Far under the eaves, the bunch of sage,
The satchel hung on its nail, amid
The heirlooms of a bygone age."

But let him beware! "Facts are facts," said Trowbridge, "but if not clothed with grace and the warm tissues of human sympathy, they are no more the truth than a skeleton is a living body."

The first to direct Riley's attention to the wonderland of poetry in his immediate surroundings was his schoolmaster, Lee O. Harris. Trowbridge was the second. There was a third.

One afternoon in October, 1876, while Riley was aglow with the *vision* of his mission, there came to Greenfield a man who as an orator had few peers in his generation, Robert G. Ingersoll. His speech—a political one in the heat of a national campaign—was embellished with poems in prose, which seemed to Riley the gift of the gods. He listened for two hours to eloquence that remained golden in memory for forty years. Extolling the splendor of the new day, the orator said: “Nothing is more marvelous than the common everyday facts of everyday life. The age of wonders is not in the past. There are millions of miracles under our feet. In the lives of the people, here and now, are all the comedy and tragedy they can comprehend.” Before closing, the orator touched upon another important fact: that the luster of noble qualities shines alike in the plainest workman and the most accomplished gentleman. Indeed it had shone under a rough exterior and had been wanting in the polished scholar. The hairy, unsocial savage who knew how to get things done, and got them done, was a better servant of his country than one who, without the positive qualification, happened to be intellectually eminent.

It was a center shot; it went straight to Riley’s heart. Scales fell from his eyes. He saw his field. Better yet, he saw as never before the glory of the imperfect and the commonplace. He attached greater value to his surroundings. Referring to the orator he said, borrowing the familiar lines,

“I know not what this man may be,
Sinner or saint; but as for me,
One thing I know, that I am he
Who once was blind and now I see!”

That day he saw what his friend John Burroughs

wrote at a later period, that the lure of the distant is deceptive; that the great opportunity is where we are: "Every place is under the stars, every place is the centre of the world"—his native town with its neighboring county-seats, Anderson, Newcastle, Rushville, Shelbyville and Indianapolis, encircled a kingdom large enough for the exercise of his powers. That contracted circle was also wide enough for a degree of rapture he never experienced in the heyday of fame. Yearning for the hilltops glorified, "lacking everything save faith and a great purpose," he was in a hundred ways happier than he was in later years, when success showered upon him applause and gold.

It is a literal fact that within a radius of forty miles of Greenfield, Riley found all the material for his poems. What he found outside the circle was accidental and had its counterpart within it. Here were all the comedy and tragedy of human life; here a million miracles under his feet; here the center of the world. Since he touched the heartstrings in his own community, since the history of the nation is the history of communities written large, and since human nature is the same the world over, his songs were destined to be universally loved.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE TRIPOD OF THE DEMOCRAT

ONCE more the lights of his native streets had become feeble tapers—once more the Argonaut sought his fortune in Anderson—not on the “Buckeye,” but on a county paper.

“Beneath the lamplight’s scorching shade,
With eyes all wild, and lips all pale,
He courts the Muse. Read from his pen,—
THE DEMOCRAT. This tells the tale.”

His purse-strings were contracted and Greenfield could not relax them. “Why an appetite,” he quizzically asked; “what is the good of cutting your wisdom teeth when there is nothing to eat in the house but a butcher’s bill and a dun for rent?”

The yearning of this man for freedom from the bondage of debt is one of the many pathetic phases of his existence. Other artists, the “British Book” said, painted to live, but John Opie lived to paint, and that was identically the relation Riley desired to sustain to poetry—not to write poems to live, but *live to write poems*.

Perhaps, after all, the bitter experience was the way of Destiny to bruise his heart, that its door of sympathy might be always open to the need and distress of the world. He never sought money for ignoble ends, never bowed the knee before it as a worshipper, but he craved it for personal benefit that he might thereby do a work of universal benefit. At Greenfield and for years after

he moved to the city, Riley often talked to friends in the guise of the light-hearted Skimpole, overwhelming them with money—"in his expansive intentions." "He had no more idea of wages than a bluebird," said his friend Reed. "Money was a mystery." It had the color of magic. In the folk tales, the caps of fairies and musicians were red—and *gold* was red. As late as the year of his first book (1883), he sighs for the "red ruddocks." "You must not forget," he wrote his friend Parker, "that in the pecuniary aspect I present the picturesque outlines of the typical poet—merry, at times, thank God, as Chispa describes the Serenaders who enjoy hunger by day and noise by night." There were gloomy days—but never a moment for surrender. "Merry," he sometimes repeated when at work, "merry as old Skimpole." Creditors "might pluck his feathers now and then, and clip his wings, but all the same he would *work* and *sing*." "Afterwhile," he merrily wrote another friend,

"Afterwhile—the poet-man
Will do better when he can—
Afterwhile, with deep regrets,
He will even pay his debts;
And by drayload, cart and hack,
Will take borrowed volumes back,
And will gibber, shriek and smile—
When he brings 'em—afterwhile!"

There were occasions at night however when he was really blue, when he had to sing himself to sleep with some such "rhythmical tumult" as,

"I am weary of waiting, and weary of tears,
And my heart wearies, too, all these desolate years,
Moaning over the one only song that it knows;—
The little red ribbon, the ring and the rose."

Prior to employment on the *Anderson Democrat*, he made several fruitless attempts to secure a place in some editorial room. Painting signs was not the only way to make a living. "I had once," he writes Parker of the *Newcastle Mercury*, late in 1876, "a few weeks' experience as the local editor of our little paper. I liked it better than anything I ever tried to do, and I write to say that I would like to be with you in that capacity. I would be willing and glad to work for whatever you were able to pay for such help, if help is desired. Please revolve it around your brain a time or two and tell me your conclusion." It turned out that the *Mercury* was "a bankrupt organ without a copper for contributors."

"The long winter months, and the glare of the snows,
With never a glimmer of sun in the skies,"

wore on to the following "WORD" in the *Democrat*—the last week in April, 1877:

It is our endeavor to serve the best interests of our patrons, and with this in view, we have secured the services of Mr. J. W. Riley, who has attained quite a reputation as a poet and writer. His productions have already attracted the attention of such men as Longfellow, Whittier, Trowbridge and many other notables; and being convinced of the high order of the talent he possesses in that direction, we believe we not only benefit ourselves and patrons by the acquisition of his services, but that he is also supplied with a congenial position, and one in which he will develop the highest attributes of his nature. Feeling that we already have the hearty endorsement of a kindly public, we leave Mr. Riley to close the homily.

TODISMAN & CROAN (Proprietors).

In making my salam to the Anderson public, I desire first to extend my warmest thanks to those who have interested themselves in my behalf, and whose kindly influence has assisted me to an office I will ever feel a pleasure in occupying. And in the fulfillment of the duties that devolve upon me, it shall be my earnest endeavor to merit the trust and confidence that has been so generously reposed. That the position is one that is fraught with a thousand trials and vexations, shall not deter me from the steadfast purpose of right and justice; and while I shall at times exercise the lighter attributes which go to make up the interest of a weekly, it shall be my care as well, to weed away all petty slurs that choke the growth of dignity, and in fact, to nurture jealously the character of the paper, and assist in my humble way in giving to its individuality the stamp which "bears without abuse the grand old name of gentleman." Trusting the kindly indulgence of the public for any discrepancy of inexperience, I am,

Yours truly,

J. W. RILEY.

There were doubtless many cups of happiness in Anderson, but none quite so full as that which Riley held when he entered the *Democrat* office. For the first time in his life he was under contract at a regular salary—forty dollars a month. When at the end of the first month, the circulation was doubled and his salary raised to sixty, his cup ran over. That was unmistakable testimony to the merit of the "acquisition." (The "thousand trials and vexations" had not yet arrived.) There came also exchanges with their compliments. "One of the best writers among the young litterateurs of the west," said the *Indianapolis Herald*. "A good thing for the *Democrat*," said the *Newcastle Mercury*. The *Earlhamite*, which had given wings to his poem, "Fame," sent its best wishes and hoped "he would find many roses in the pathway of life." "Our rising Indiana

poet," said the *Richmond Independent*, "hails us from the tripod of the *Anderson Democrat*, a newsy, bright-faced paper, which will grow under the spell of his versatile genius. A capital, illustrated burlesque, 'Maud Muller,' adorns the first page, the artistic and poetical production of the new aspirant to editorial honors."

The merriment "Maud Muller" created was considerable. There was a ripple among the exchanges when

"The sweet girl stood in the sun that day,
And raked the Judge instead of the hay."

And a ripple was all Riley intended. "It was a mere bagatelle," he said. That any one should consider it a poetical production was to "steep his mirth in chagrin." The original "Maud Muller" had been dramatized and Whittier had "utterly disowned her," which fact suggested the little diversion at the Quaker Poet's expense.

Very soon the man beneath the lamplight's scorching shade was known around town as the "Perspiring Poet." And truly the work he accomplished from April to September, 1877, was extraordinary. He was literally an eagle-eyed Argus, meditating, playing, working, and perspiring by day and by night on his weekly tripod. If there was anything in Anderson or Madison County that escaped his telescopic or microscopic vision, his fellow citizens failed to find it.

Among the manifold things he did was to "embellish the news." Trowbridge's counsel bore fruit from the first. The bare facts sent in from Kill Buck, Poliwag, and Weasel Prairie, were not the truth till clothed with his sparkling humor. Country correspondents scarcely recognized their prosy items, after they had passed through the *Democrat's* "humorous mill." They read them with inconceivable surprise and glee.

Brightwood, for example, was "the little station down the Bee Line that did not possess enough dignity to stop a train."

A carpenter, shingling a barn at Prosperity, "slipped from the roof and shot over the eaves like a bull-frog."

Captain Doxey's "mocking bird" was a "twittering pilgrim, and when properly wound up played three tunes; but the ratchet slipped occasionally and 'Captain Jinks' and 'Molly Darling' flew into each other with a vehemence that was blood-curdling."

"Our Editor is running round the country like a water-bug, and a perfect nebula of new subscribers bespangles our subscription list;

The lark is up to meet the sun,
The bee is on the wing;
The *Democrat* it has begun
To go like everything."

A team ran away at Perkinsville. "The horses got down to their work and for a time

'Beneath their spurning feet the road
Like an arrowy Alpine river flowed.' "

"While with joy akin to rapture we cluster round the glowing grate and settle comfortably to the entrancing task of our 'Ode to May,' let us not forget the anguish of our unfortunate neighbor as he buries himself in the bleak and barren basement of his heart and wonders bitterly what his fussy old consort meant by having him take down the sitting room stove so soon."

"If the young man who sends us the poetry beginning 'How beautiful iz the birds' will bring us the address of his parents, we will see that his remains reach home in safety."

The sweet Goddess of Spring had been coquetting,

but now "she has unrolled her emerald carpet over the world; thrown to the winds her leafy banners; touched with her mystic wand the folded bud, and wooed it into bloom. She has scattered, too, with lavish hand the feathered seeds of song and called to life the glad voice of the brook; the sunshine is a gleaming smile of gold throughout the day; and in the night, whose strange weird beauty awes us like a gipsy maiden's eyes, the ebon back of the Thomas cat is arched, and his quivering tail points to the solemn stars."

These and scores of other items equally humorous, accompany the following lines that appeared in his "invocation" column to the business public—

"Come to the *sanctum* board to-night,
And friendship there will be your gain,—
For where the *Democrat* is found
No sorrow can remain."

There was a passage in the Life of the "Cornish Wonder," John Opie, that appealed to Riley with special significance. According to Opie, he who wishes to be a painter must not overlook any kind of knowledge, and, as Riley saw it, the law is the same for the poet.

On entering the *Democrat* office, he immediately put "the painter's injunction" into practice. Wide-awake as a lamp-lighter he went down the streets and up the alleys, through the highways and byways for materials. Nor did he have to stare at things to know what and where they were. It was current opinion that "he could look down the shelves of a hardware store and see at a glance everything on them." In June the *Democrat* began to mass materials. For weeks it harped on "practical things"—three to five columns an issue. It made its bow in—

AN IDYL OF TO-DAY

The Blunt Blade of Business
Ground to an Ethereal Edge.

.

OUR POET AT THE CRANK

Motto: "Grind till the last armed foe expires."

.

INVOCATION

O Courteous Muse, you have served me so long
As guide through the devious highways of song;
And ever have led me with willingest hand
Adown the dim aisles of that fanciful land,
Where even Aladdin—the luckiest scamp
That ever was spared by a kerosene lamp—
Not happier was or more burdened with bliss
Than the poor, impecunious writer of this.
And as I recall with rapturous thrill
The ripe fruits of rhyme which I gathered at will—
The lush, juicy clusters on Poesy's tree
That weighed down the limbs to accommodate me,—
The jet of my thanks flashes into a blaze
That will brighten my life all the rest of my days.
And so, as the gas glimmers over my brow
And gleams on the pencil I'm writing with now—
And glances from that with a jocular flash
To redden my already ruddy mustache;—
I can but give over all yearnings for fame,
To write a few lines with the singular aim
Of pleasing the world with an idyl that rings
The music of business and practical things.

It was a bid for business to open its alcoves for the poet's inspection. "There is no cessation of the arduous labors of my position," he wrote his Schoolmaster in July, "and I am grateful for it, for I think the newspaper school an excellent one and filled with most valuable experience. I am still at the crank, but even with

that I have daily acquired some new proficiency. I have written many poems that I have laid away—the kind I publish are only intended for the casual reader, as you know. The better ones I reserve for better distinction.”

The casual reader saw such “literary atrocities” as “Craqueodoom” and “Wrangdillion,” such inferior fruits of labor as “The Frog,” which he termed his batrachian idyl, “A Man of Many Parts,” “A Test of Love,” “George Mullen’s Confession,” “Wash Lowry’s Reminiscence” and “Now We Can Sleep, Mother,” the latter a parody on the old familiar “Rock Me To Sleep,” celebrating the expiration of the sewing machine patent. The drudgery of millions of poor women was at an end. “Broken was the sewing machine monopoly—snapped the last thread of tyranny that bound a starving people hand and foot;

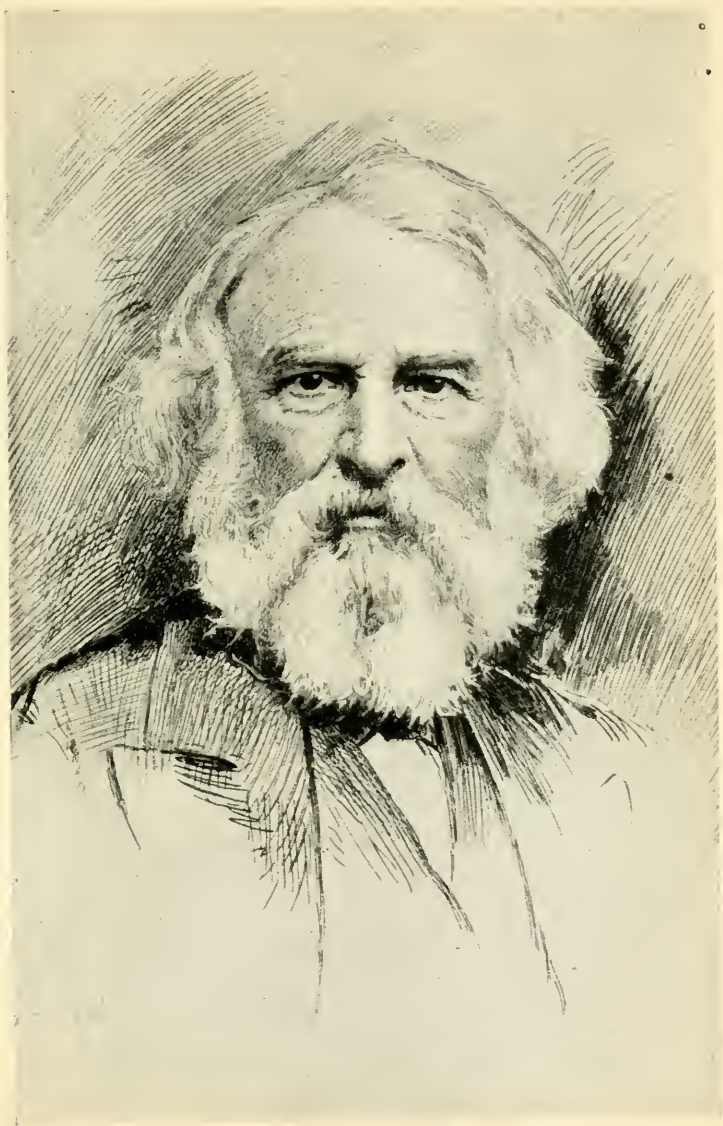
“Backward, throw backward the curtain to-night,
Open the window and let the glad light
Of the round moon shimmer over the scene
Where we at last own a sewing machine.”

The casual reader also saw, and muddled his wits with such incoherent prose effusions as “The Duck Creek Jabberwock,” “Unawangawawa; or The Eyelash of the Lightning,” “Trillpipe’s Boy on Spiders,” and “The Anderson Mystery,”—the first, the story of “a strange animal of the basket-backed species in a neck of the woods where they never read the Bible or take the *Democrat*”; the last, the tale of a Healthy Ghost, “facts without fancy about a mysterious lodger that sheltered its goblin head” within the walls of a haunted house, some such mystery as the echoes of footsteps on the Ghost’s Walk when the dusky wings of solitude sat

brooding upon Chesney Wold. The "Perspiring Poet" had searched the house "from turret to foundation stone, gone through the floor like the genii in some enchanted palace, had peeped under the sleepers and emerged in a coil of cobwebs with the unfathomable mystery—and hoped the day would soon dawn when he could give his readers a full biography of the ghostly visitor, with pen-portrait, including stature, weight, color of eyes and hair."

The "Jingling Editor" began his "idyl on business" with a curtsy to the main-floor room under his office, where the clangor of iron-ware contrasted painfully with the silence he craved when the Muse was indulgent:

"Here on the balcony, a sign
Somewhat marred by the rain and the shine
Of a dozen years, still checks the stare
Of the passer-by with the word 'Hardware!'
While a portly man in the door below—
Making the sign more apropos—
Stands, in a loosely-fitting sack,
With his legs wide out and his hat set back,
But an open face and a genial air
Shows that his heart is a softer ware
Than the goods he keeps in the store-room there.
Stretching along on either side
Of the walls of the warehouse long and wide,
The shelving sags with the heavy weight
Of hinges, hoes, and the chains that grate
Their tinkling links on the gleaming blades
Of the scythes below, and the rakes and spades;
And the thousand nameless instruments
That the tireless mind of man invents
For the tradesman's use, or the farmer's hand,
Or the sportman's need, or the smith's demand;
Till even the eye as it looks on these—
Dazzled is it with the sight it sees."



HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW
1868



JOHN TOWNSEND TROWBRIDGE
From a photograph taken in 1872

"The huge appetite of the public for wonders requires daily food." "The Poet at the Crank" knew it—and supplied the demand in cargoes. No weekly editor reached the rural districts as did Riley. Farmers called to see him. They came with their families—and brought gifts from their gardens and orchards. Bouquets "blossomed on his table while their fragrance hovered on odorous wings about the dusty crannies of his office." Once when the street in front of his balcony was congested with wagons that had brought families with their applause from the country, he was reminded of huzzas for the "Cornish Wonder." "These coaches of nobility," he jestingly observed, "are become a nuisance to the neighborhood."

The keynote of his success lay in this, the establishment of a friendly relation between town and country—and he was about the first man in America to do it. "Without the farmer," he said, "the town can not flourish. Ye men of the streets, be cordial to our rustic brethren. They are more potent than bankers and lawyers, more essential to the public good than poets and politicians. Do all you can for them. Farmers should vibrate wisely and heartily between the Public Square and the farm—and *we* of the town should do the same. The golden mean escapes the plagues that haunt the extremes.

Could I pour out the nectar the gods only can,
I would fill up my glass to the brim
And drink the success of the Suburban Man."

Said a matronly mother, the idol of a happy family, "The poet just threw his arms around our county and took it to see the sights. He regaled us with the wit that had been the talk of his sign-painting. Such

cleverness in versifying, our town had never known.” “The mock seriousness,” says a writer, “with which he took himself and the *Democrat* made it for a time a more welcome sheet in Anderson than would have been a comic almanac.”

“Dear ever indulgent and generous Muse,
You may give me occasional lifts if you *choose*—
If not I shall stagger along all the same,
And so, if I falter, why, yours is the blame.”

Down the streets and up the lanes he went with the public in his “Rhyme Wagon”—and the magical thing about it was that the public could ride in it and at the same time sit by the lamplight of home.

“‘Make way for Liberty!’ (he said)
Made way for Liberty, and led
A grateful people on to where
A ceaseless clamor filled the air;
And countless hammers beat and banged
And iron echoes clanked and clanged
As if new worlds were just begun
By workingmen at Anderson.”

He took the curious gaze of worldly eyes to the new Machine Shop where the pulse of labor

“Gilded bands and polished steel,
And strange machines whose works reveal
The master minds that have resigned
Their thoughts to benefit mankind.”

Then through “cinder alley” to the Repair Shop, where the off-hand mare had kicked the end gate out of the wagon, splintered the single-tree

“And sprung the tongue, till—I *declare!*—
’Twas enough to make a preacher swear.”

Then across the railroad (with apologies to Byron and his “Waterloo”) to hear the sound of *ripleury* in

the Planing Mill. There artisans had gathered in noisy array—

“A hundred hearts beat happily; and when
Sawdust arose with its voluptuous smell,
Red eyes looked *work* to eyes as red again
And all went merry as a *married belle*.
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a
rising knell.”

Did ye not hear it? It was not the wind, nor the car rattling o'er the stony street. It was the roar of the Mill on a rampage with the whistles that spilled discordant shrieks from their brazen throats, sweet to the hungry men at twelve o'clock as melody to the heart of a poet.

Then to the Retail District, where the Babel of business was bewildering, where clerks were caroling gay and

“The chorus ever echoes on and on,
And swells in volume till the glee
Is wafted over land and sea.”

To the corner room of the hotel where the jeweler blossoms like a Persian king in affluence:

“Who but he
Could read a watch's pedigree?
A Chieftain to the Highlands bound,
Who missed the 'Accommodation,'
Pulled out his watch and took it round
To Shirk for reparation.
And Shirk squints sharply through the glass—
He took a pair of 'pinchers,'
And raised a little wheel of brass
And nipped it with his clinchers,
And put it back, and oiled the works,
And cleaned the graven border;
And watch and man went out of Shirk's
In perfect running order.”

Oh, that mammoth stock of shoes—gaiters, carpet slippers, and red-top boots with copper-tips for the children!

“‘What boots it?’ Shakespeare asks—
We answer Conwell’s Store;
For never boots were better made,
Or sold as cheaply to the trade
In Anderson before.”

“And don’t forget some cash to pay the pedler”—
scan those bright faces behind the glass at the Citizen’s Bank,

“Walk up to the counter and lay down a check,
And see the cashier lightly curving his neck
Evincing that he’s not a moneyless wreck.”

Feast the eye on the tints of fashion, the reds, and the blues and modest hues, and the flowers that light the gloom of the millinery room,

“Where the goods are all new
And as fresh and as pure as the pearliest dew
That jewels the jasmine in jauntiest May.
The ties and cuffs
And laces and ruffs,
And all the little fancy stuffs
Are too sublime
For idle rhyme
To ever dare the heights to climb.”

Stop at the Bon Ton Shaving Parlor where the mustache is made as soft and fair as silks of the corn in the summer air; see the barber

“Strop his razor till it gleams
Brighter than the light that beams
From the moon on winter snow
When the sleighbells come and go.”

Up a winding stair—a lunge and a jerk—a thump and a bump—a rough road for the “Rhyme Wagon” to go,—up to ring a little bell, up to the Gallery “to see the picture of the man with an album in his hand”; and before descending, a pause on the balcony in the shade of the catalpa tree to see if the world, morbid and turbid in its greed for pelf, wears the color of romance it wore in youth:—

“Twitter me something low and sweet,
Over the din of the noisy street,
Coax a sound from the ivory keys,
And fling it out on the fevered breeze
Like a spray of dew on a drooping flower
That blooms again at the magic power,—
And the restless hearts that beat below
Perchance may dream of the Long Ago,
And sigh with a rapture of bliss
For an era more refulgent than this
And feel again in some sweet refrain,
Release from the chafing strife for gain.”

Pegasus was on the brink of a flight from the balcony when the “blunt blade of business” re-hitched him to the “Rhyme Wagon” and he descended to the Corner Store

“Just across the street
Where foreign fruits, and pineapples
And oranges are sweet
And fresh as when in Tropic climes
They ripened in the sun,
And never dreamed of better times.”

Farther down the street to the store where the “Giant Boot fills a space on the sidewalk as large as any man in town”; on to the Palace where wool-delaines and calicoes are kept; upstairs again to the Dentist where moans are spiced—

“With writhings, shriek and shout
While the shrew has her teeth jerked out.”

Down the Main street again to the Merchant who would not advertise, whose name, mysteriously known to fame, was never seen in the *Democrat*;

“And hence the Muse was prone to balk
With sorrow-moistened eyes,
And sigh to think she could not talk
Of tact and enterprise.”

Across the way to the Druggist who has the “rinktum” for the stomach when Old Man Ague comes around “shaking hands with everybody, shaking legs, and feet, and toes, till his wracked and wretched victims long to shake his acquaintance.”

See the “crowd of customers happy as a circus-band come to town.” History sings of the virtues and Verse carols

“The praise of the Grocery men
Who have built them a notable name,
Their faces bright as Prosperity’s when
She toots on the trumpet of Fame.”

Then to the Book Store for croquet sets, rustic brackets, fancy paper—and the news and photographic views; to the Furniture Store where the farmer pulled out his pocketbook and bought his wife a parlor set;

“And when she still insisted
That she knew no end of cares,
His money roll untwisted,
For a set of sofa chairs.”

From Bacchus who crushed “the sweet poison from the purple grape” to Tennyson who spiced the banquet with “drinking songs—and the dust of death,” poets have sung the praise or blame of wine. And

since, in a wild frenzy, the "Crank was flaunting everything aloft like a flag,"—rhyming of sulkies, gristmills, mattress springs, undertakers, public jokes, the Public Purse, cigars, potatoes, fish and fowl, and "everything the market affords from East to West,"—since it was thus and so, there slipped from his pen a fragment for "the juice that drippeth from the grape."

"And now the jolly Muse, with rosy lip
Bedecked with crimson dew, must sing the praise
Of wines that heaven knows have caught the fire
Of some forgotten sun and kept it through
A hundred years of gloom still glowing in
A heart of ruby."

There was a rare assortment—ripe vintages of all descriptions: Old Port Rye; Kentucky Bourbon—

"Liquors that so strangely lubricate
The grooves of life that all the world slides by
Without a jar or care of discontent,—
Proof brandies that the doctors recommend
In feverous times, when skeleton disease,
In trailing robes of pestilence bedight,
Stalks grimly through the land, and feeds the grave
with mortals."

Lest the "Crusaders" protest too vehemently, he hastened the next week to praise the "stream" that eloquently flowed from the Town Pump. Men might draw the cork and tip the decanter—"father Adam might founder on apples" but liquor was neither boon nor luxury in the Garden of Eden—

"When the heart like a plummet resounds in the dumps,
O hasten to Platter & Batterall for pumps
That will draw up the ale of old Adam, and make
Your thirsty soul happy for charity's sake.
They have all appliances ever ordained
To handle elixirs, both dug-for and rained:
So here's to the pumps that will jerk up success
And splash satisfaction all over your dress."

"The way to do a thing is to do it"—and there is another saying—"Do the thing and you shall have the power." So it was with the "Poet at the Crank." He had been a minstrel, a sign-painter, a vagabond, a scrub reporter, a "lawyer," a rabid reader of novels and a clever imitator of old poets. There was danger of his becoming Jack of all trades and master of none. On entering the *Democrat* office that danger vanished. He became "master of rhymes." With singleness of purpose he cherished the art of making verse. He made rhymes (no end of them the mere shavings of the shop), rhymes of every conceivable kind about every conceivable thing—made them till his task, from the metrical side of poetry, was as easy as for winds to blow or brooks to murmur. Having mastered that, the next and all-commanding thing was to foster ideas. Though he rhyme with the tongues of angels, if he had not ideas he were a tinkling cymbal. To originate ideas was not his province—they were gifts—but once he *had* them, he was to nourish and fondle them as a mother the new-born child. "When I neglect that mandate, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

The "Jingling Editor" especially endeared himself to the public heart by his abounding "exercise of the lighter attributes that go to make up a weekly." Since

"Kings sometimes unbend,
And Kings may jovial be,"

said he, "the poet likewise may let Pegasus frisk and caper through the fall oats of wit and ridicule." It was said that he could "coax more laughter out of an ink bottle into the *Democrat* than any two papers in the state could hold." "Why take the *Danbury News*

or the *Burlington Hawkeye*," wrote a subscriber "when you can get the *Democrat*? The poor sigh to read it." The humor in his "sappy locals" made Old Sobersides clap his thighs.

"Local! Local! Beware of the day
When the *Democrat* snatches you out of the way."

A farmer "staggered into the office yesterday and laid a watermelon big as a barrel on our dissecting table."

The picnic at Blacklidge Hills, with dainties spread on the green grass "has moored itself away in a golden port of memory, and there rides at anchor like a fairy galleon in the harbor of our dreams."

Glancing along the table of a cheap boarding house where "a dozen herbivorous cannibals were performing on roast'n-ears as if they were so many French harps," the "Crank" was thrilled with "musical emotions a buttonwood orchestra could not produce."

May glides onward into June; "the *price* of strawberries is on the market; each is worth a watermelon; we have saved our money to pay off a mortgage."

Last week the new patent jail broke again—"seven prisoners dripped out before the hole was discovered."

"Give us the log jail with two rooms interfused,
No friends but the darkness, no windows to loot,
The old-fashioned jail that our grandfathers used."

The pump on the east side of the Square that "for weeks has suffered from a throat affection, has been relieved and now wears a wind-pipe second to none in the county."

The contents of the street sprinkler fell like a blessing on the thirsty street. "O papa," said a little girl,

"Her cheek against the window-pane—
'Yonder goes a man a-haulin' rain.' "

To a band of serenaders: "Tackle the office again and we will give you a local long as the Moral Law." For a band of Bulgarians, however, the "Jingling Editor" had nothing but "a pan of hot pitch: come again and we'll drop a harrow on you."

The *weekly* was humming. "Last week we counted twenty-three articles in an Exchange which had been taken from the *Democrat* without credit. We are considering the propriety of sending out advanced sheets for clipping purposes. We printed six hundred extras for our last issue and fondly hoped to appease the public appetite; but as the supply was ravenously gobbled by Saturday noon, we made a note, and will this week stretch our elastic capacity to its utmost tension. The *Democrat* is indeed nutritious."

The "Poet at the Crank" seems to have been the agent of prosperity. In four months the circulation increased from four hundred to twenty-four hundred subscribers—a fact as mysterious to him as the maneuvers of the Muse. By June business round the Public Square was "flourishing in a soil of industry and enterprise." Townsmen and countrymen were scrambling on the "Rhyme Wagon";

"On this side and on that
They grapple with success
Till smiling Fortune pets them
With her tenderest caress."

"We are assuming stately proportions," the "Crank" wrote the Schoolmaster; "we are almost certain of the highest journalistic success. Yours always, Jay Whoop."

In addition to a shower of jingles for the merchants,

the first week of June the poet coaxed from his ink bottle a breezy advertising column for the *Democrat*:

THE ANDERSON DEMOCRAT

—is a—

Good Little Paper

—and you—

Ought to be Kind to it!

.
It ain't "the best paper in the State," or if it is, it won't acknowledge it, for it someway feels that the market is already glutted with that brand. No, it is simply

GOOD!

and you ought to love it as you would a great, fat, laughing baby with a bunch of jingling keys.

.
Its editors are all so gentle and artless! Their features are invariably wreathed in smiles, and their noble hearts hammer away at the blissful hours like a sheepskin band in a Fourth o' July delegation. Everybody seems impressed with the editors, and their amiable disposition is a perpetual sermon for the evil-disposed.

.
The circulation of *The Democrat* is as large as any other county paper, and is increasing with a degree of velocity that lifts the hat of the oldest inhabitant.

.
The Democrat makes a specialty of news, and has a knack of securing more items of interest than it can possibly publish. In consequence, much of worth is unavoidably lost to the public, to say nothing of the thousand gems of purest ray serene that hide their brilliance in the dark, unfathomed caves of the waste basket.

The Democrat is the farmer's friend and never tires of telling him what he already knows—throwing in occasionally some hints of a simple device that will keep rats from climbing up the legs of his corn crib, or a recipe that will knock hog cholera higher than Kilgore's kite. Our recipes for hotts are much sought after, and are alone worth the price of subscription.

• • • • •

The Democrat's market reports are always lovely. This department is under the management of a lightning calculator. Occasional glimpses of the gifted gentleman may be caught through the periphery of figures in which he is constantly enveloped. He is the boon companion of the grain merchant—the confidential adviser of the stock buyer, and the bosom friend of the butcher, the baker and candlestick maker.

• • • • •

And lastly, *The Democrat* is full to the brim of the creamiest literature of the day, and ever replete with the soul-searing utterances—"Hist! the blood-hounds are on me trail" and "'Twas but the work of a moment," and so forth, and so forth. O, it's bully! And poetry! *The Democrat* keeps a poet constantly on hand who writes anything from *Paradise Lost* down to a candy-kiss verse. Odes, however, seem to be his strongest inclination—in fact, he Ode so much when *The Democrat* employed him, that they had to advance his first month's salary. But he's frugal now and can wear a collar longer without turning than any other of his species in the State.

SUBSCRIBE NOW
AND MOURN AT LEISURE.

While the *Democrat* was "going like everything," the poet wrote "Some Observations on Decoration Day" and printed his "Silent Victors." This and Henry Watterson's address at Nashville, Tennessee, the exchanges heralded as the chief "Memorial" events of the year. The printing of "poems of mark" however was exceptional; he was writing and saving them "for better distinction."

The work he did on the *Democrat* staggers imagination. What he accomplished on the "Rhyme Wagon," conservative judges considered a full summer's work. But that was secondary in quality if not in quantity. Formerly his poetic effusions were concealed with a few favorite books in his "reticule." When filled, its contents were transferred to a "telescope." Now he dignified his room with a trunk. Verily that trunk was the "Chinese Casket," save that its contents did not consist solely of the *best* that he wrote. Its confusion and disorder were beyond belief. It contained *everything* he wrote—jingle, normal English, doggerel and dialect; pathos and humor, both prose and verse; and show-bills and letters, and trinkets innumerable—all locked away in its musty confines, to drift perilously about, in the years to come, from hotel to hotel, from attics to job printing rooms and dark basements as the Fates decreed. No Chinese princess guarded the "Casket" while Riley wrote for it—unless she did it artfully in the guise of one of his numerous superstitions: namely that "*he should destroy nothing he wrote.*" In moments of inspiration he was aware of some force other than his own guiding his pen. It was not for him in those seasons of rapture to determine values. Save all, and let the public judge.

The trunk contained the Golden Fleece of the seven-

ties, original manuscripts of verse that a decade later first saw the light in book form in *Neghborly Poems*, *Afterwhiles*, and *Rhymes of Childhood*. Like the *Koran*, portions of those books "were written in fractions and flung pellmell into a casket."

While on the staff of the *Democrat*, Riley's room—"No. 19—North Main Street—Up Stairs—In the Rear"—like its successors in Greenfield and Indianapolis was little more than a repository for what he wrote. It was his second "literary den." Callers commented on its vacant appearance, the meager supply of furniture, and the absence of pictures on the wall. He was the "Crank" in the daytime and usually wrote his jingle in the *Democrat* office—the front room on the same floor. At night he was the poet, and when serenaders came they had to tackle the silence under the window in the rear.

Here in his second "literary den" notable contributions to Child Literature had their origin. Here the *real* child received "a just hearing in the world of letters." Among the first of the child poems to appear in the *Democrat* was "Willie"—not a pretentious poem, perhaps not intended by its author as a poem at all. But it contained enough merit to be revamped for the first child book (*Rhymes of Childhood*), in which it was entitled "Prior to Miss Belle's Appearance," and when the poet with such magical effect began to breathe the innocence of childhood across the footlights, "Willie" was given the last place on the program and for a long time retained that distinction in his public readings. "That child-sketch," said his comrade Nye, "makes him the best entertainer in the universe."

In July the "vexations" began and by the end of

August were hatching in such swarms that it took a lightning calculator to keep a record of them. Occasionally an exchange struck the "Crank" between the eyes with a pellet like this: "The *Anderson Democrat* complains that its neighbors are stealing its original poetry. The man who would steal Riley's poetry (in the language of General Dix) should be shot on the spot."

"Complying with the request of numerous citizens," the "Jingling Editor," accompanied by his genial friend, William M. Croan of the *Democrat*, visited the Poor Farm "for the purpose of determining the real condition of the institution that had so long been the subject of unfavorable comment." What the "Crank" said in his editorial, headed in "Over the Hills to the Poor House," was "in utter disregard of all affectation and in strict adherence to facts. That the County of Madison should pay out seven thousand dollars a year to support an institution in such degrading style was a blot on her escutcheon years could not erase."

The indictment brought the Poor Farm overseer to town with a "gun" in his pocket. He met the "Crank" at the foot of the stairs, who,

"Quaking like an aspen leaf
Referred him to his journal Chief."

Fortunately the chief editor was "somewhere down the street." When the overseer found him the sign in the zodiac was unfavorable for shooting and he returned to the Farm to let the sun set on his wrath. Meantime the "Crank," like a thief in the night, had fled through an alley to the White River thickets, there to remain till Old Granny Dusk—

"With her cluckety shoes, and her old black gown
Came to pilot his *shadow* back into town."

The anti-liquor "Crusaders" began to buzz about the "Jingling Editor" soon after the jolly Muse sang the praise of wine, though the production that gave particular offense was a burlesque on baseball. They saw more in it than the ridicule of a popular game. It was a libel on their favorite Temperance advocate, Luther Benson, whose arraignment of drink was as unforgettable as it was eloquent. From "the green and holy morning of life" he had one long struggle with the demon Rum. A specimen of his eloquence throws light on his friend's "imitation": "In winning men from evil," says Benson, in one of his brilliant periods, "send me to the blasphemer of the holy Master's name; send me to the forger, who for long years of cunning has defrauded his fellowmen; send me to the murderer, who lies in the shadow of the gallows, with red hands dripping with the blood of innocence; but send me not to the lost human shape whose spirit is on fire, and whose flesh is steaming and burning with the flames of hell. And why? Because his will is enthralled in the direst bondage conceivable—his manhood is in the dust, and a demon sits in the chariot of his soul, lashing the fiery steeds of passion to maniacal madness."

Now the fact is that no son of misfortune was more fully aware of the truth in Benson's words than Riley. He, too, was in bondage; he, too, was fighting a good fight. The last thing in the world he would have done would have been to give offense to a man "whose passion for liquor could slumber for weeks and then manifest itself with the force of a hurricane."

As has been seen, Riley was a clever imitator, and

he only intended, in his "imitation" of Benson, to praise the orator's eloquence. But participants in the "Murphy Movement" would not have it so—and, strange to say, there was a buzz of criticism among baseball zealots, too. The flaming caption in the *Democrat*, "BENSON OUT-BENSONED" with such sub-heads as "BASEBALL CATCHER HOPELESSLY INSANE" and "STRANGE HALLUCINATION OF A MADMAN" were to say the least unfortunate.

"Are you going to fill an umpire's grave or are you going to quit and be a man?" Baseball fans did not like it.

With implied apologies to Benson his clever imitator poured a stream of eloquence through the lips of "a most remarkable specimen of lunacy, Tod Geary, the famous baseball catcher, who it will be remembered has, since May, been suffering mentally from an injury received on the head by the careless batting of Cy Thatcher." The way Geary "poured forth the stream" was rather dramatic. Taking his position, according to Riley, on a little square zinc that was tacked on the uncarpeted floor of the asylum, and unbuttoning his collar, and rolling up his sleeves, his "startling invective" (in part) fell on the ear as follows:

"Talk to me of whisky!" he exclaimed; "Why, I tell you, men, if every crazy, crawling, writhing, hissing serpent of the curse were let loose upon me now, I could take them to my bosom here, and fondle them and pet them and love them like so many rosy babies, if it would for one minute free me from the bloody fangs of the inflaming passion for Baseball.

"Away far back along the dusky shadows of the past, as far away as History, the eagle-eyed, can fathom with her far-reaching vision, we find the charred and

blackened symbols of the game of sport, that in old Babylonish days coaxed lazy laughter from the lips of kings, and tickled royal ribs with senseless mirth. The curse of this debasing appetite in man has been pampered, fed and fostered for so long, that to-day, two thousand millions of human beings are bound in loathsome bondage with the rustless chains of habit, and fettered and fastened down forever to a vice as hopelessly damnable as that which first brought sin and death into the world, and locked with relentless bars of fate the gilded gates of Paradise.

"No, I tell you, Baseball is a snare and a delusion. To-day the whole wide world writhes and blisters under the incandescent fury of this fiery element condensed and focused into a white-heat of passion that would hiss and boil and bubble over a slack tub of morality as wide and deep as the Atlantic Ocean." (A raking fire for the fans.)

While lesser vexations were exchanging shots with the "Perspiring Poet," a more violent tempest was brewing. The baseball episode and the "hip pocket gun" were breezes in comparison with the storm that rose out of the unknown when the spirit of "the late lamented Poe" began to walk abroad. Since that was a blast of huge proportions, it is reserved for a chapter of its own. It was the sky-rocket that brought the "exercises" on the *Democrat* to a close.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LITERARY TORPEDO

THE "Jingling Editor" of the *Democrat* was wont to strain what usage terms poetic license. He did so in that racy sample of metrical porridge, "Thanksgiving Day at Henschley's." Gleeefully ran the metrical stream:—

"And this is how it happened some discrepancies befell
At the late midsummer meeting in front of the hotel,
Where, it seems, the folks assembled were concurring
more to be
In keeping with *contention* than the laws of harmony.

"For there among the number were two rivals of the
press,
Who had photographed each other with prolonged maliciousness;
Who in their respective columns had a thousand words
to spare
For the other fellow just across the county Public
Square.

"And cheek by jowl together were two members of the
bar,
Politically, legally, and socially at war,
Who denounced each other daily, and in every local
phrase
That could make the matter binding all the balance
of their days.

“And an ordinary actor, and an artist of renown,
Whose cue, it seemed, for smiling was the little actor’s
frown;
And the most loquacious author my remembrance can
recall,
And a little bench-leg poet that couldn’t talk at all.”

Riley fancied the notable occasion as at some little town on the “Bee Line.” The little town was the big town of Anderson. The originals of the characters had participated in a series of discussions, serious and otherwise, which culminated in a whirlwind of criticism, the “shadowy disaster” (to borrow his friend Nye’s figurative words) “wherein the ‘Jingling Editor’s’ feelings gave way beneath his feet and his heart broke with a loud report.”

The “bench-leg poet” was the “Poet at the Crank”; the “loquacious author,” an average chap about town with ambitions a trifle higher than the mediocrity of his performance. The “artist of renown” was the industrious Samuel Richards, the Artist Comrade, who from week to week illustrated the jingling verse on the *Democrat*. His paintings caught the attention of John Ruskin. His “Evangeline,” now in possession of the Detroit Art Museum, was exhibited in many cities. The “little actor” was “the twittering pilgrim from Oshkosh,” the Graphic Chum, who, after discovering the “Golden Girl” and wandering under moonless heavens with a “Rip Van Winkle Company,” had returned to Anderson to enter a law office. Of the “two members of the bar,” one was the late Captain W. R. Myers, who served his country as a soldier, and his commonwealth as secretary of state. He could spin a good story. He was not a stranger to eloquence. His voice was the envy of all who heard him, the eminent author of *Ben-*

Hur once remarking that he "would consider his fortune made if he possessed it." The "two rivals of the press" were, first, William M. Croan, the life-long friend to whom credit is due for Riley's employment on the *Democrat*; and, second, William Kinnard, the editor of the rival paper, the *Anderson Herald*. He was a young man of literary taste, had a subtle sense of humor; and he could strike hard when he thought the offense demanded it.

"Sing Ho! for the *Herald*, that popular sheet!
The friend of the honest, the foe of the 'beat,'
The pride of the good, the dread of the 'hard,'—
The dissonant ring of metallic Kinnard."

There were also, on occasion, "two disciples from the medical fraternity" and, now and then, a "thankful pastor." The bone of contention was the recognition of young writers. The club usually met at Richards' Gallery, or the *Democrat* office—and rarely under the trees in the Court House yard. At the time "some discrepancies befell," there was a full attendance seated in the chairs near the sidewalk in front of the hotel, where the temperature of the night blended fervently with the heat of contention.

"O Stilwell House! Thou royal palace hall
Whose arching doorway and inviting stair,
To all who cast a happy anchor there,
Is gracious boon and benison—We fall
Upon our knees in thanks for all
The culinary dainties of thy fare"—

but most of all we thank thee for the *nervous bush-fighting* that preceded the great newspaper war known to literature as the "Leonainie Controversy."

"Quit pushing your pencil and go to painting signs,"

said the rival editor, prodding the poet on his failure to receive eastern recognition.

"I am not accepted by the magazines because I have no reputation," returned the poet.

"You are not accepted because you do not write poetry the people want to read!"

"No," continued the poet, focusing the fire of his eye on his rival, "I tell you, all that is required to make a poem successful and popular is to prove its author a genius known to fame."

"The plausible opinion of a young writer," said the Captain, giving the editor a lift; "you are wrong; merit, not the name, makes a poem pass muster. Without name or credit, it travels like a gold piece on its intrinsic worth, as valuable in New England as in Indiana. 'Paddle Your Own Canoe' has been sung threadbare, and yet not one in a thousand knows its author is an Indiana woman. Who cares for the mint, so the jingle is genuine. Take the John Brown battle song—his soul goes marching on—the impetuous music that swept over battlefields in a night; did that kindle within the heart of armies the swift desire for action because its author bore an illustrious name? Or take the popular 'Rain on the Roof'—

'Listen to the sweet refrain
That is played upon the shingles
By the patter of the rain.'—

Was the author of that known to fame? Did he have to wait for the stamp of magazine approval before his poem received public recognition? Who is the author? Nobody knows."

"Coates Kinney," answered the poet.

"Well, nobody cares."

"I care!"

"There is the poem," pursued the Captain sagely; "it sang itself straight into the public heart."

"Not straight," returned the poet; "it had to take the jog-trot route via the weeklies. Had the signature been Longfellow instead of Kinney, the poem would have flown on the wings of the wind."

"The wisdom of Nestor!" exclaimed the loquacious author, approvingly.

"You mean Tom Noddy!" retorted the editor.

"A few years ago," continued the poet, diverting thought from the editor's rebuff, "Robert Bonner of the *New York Ledger* paid Henry Ward Beecher twenty-five thousand dollars for *Norwood*—that fabulous sum simply for a name. Had some anonymous author submitted the manuscript, the first five pages would have consigned it to the waste basket."

"And the same Robert Bonner," added the artist, rallying to the aid of the poet, "paid Longfellow three thousand dollars for the 'Hanging of the Crane.' Had the author been unknown he would not have paid thirty dollars for it."

"It would have been declined," said the poet.

"Who reads the 'Hanging of the Crane'?" asked the actor, derisively.

"I do," answered the Captain.

"Flapdoodle!" snapped the little actor, who, a loyal employee in the law office, was nevertheless that particular night the Captain's antagonist.

"An empty shell," added the loquacious author, but whether he meant the Captain or the poem was not exactly clear.

"Beg your pardon, gentlemen," said the tranquil Captain; "you fly the mark. At heart, the truth is this:

the merit of a poem wins, whether its author be Longfellow or Kinney, known or unknown. Permit me to quote a line from a poem some of you, perhaps, have read. Its author sees the azure eyes of children, dreamy and

“‘Limpid as planets that emerge
Above the ocean’s rounded verge,
Soft shining through the summer night.’”

Do you say that has no merit? Do you call that flapdoodle?”

“Heaven forbid!” interrupted the artist.

“Beautiful!” returned the actor.

“The gentleman is quite safe in that opinion,” said the Captain; “it is beautiful. He will find it in the ‘Hanging of the Crane,’”—on which a titter of confusion went round the circle at the little actor’s expense.

“You gentlemen claim,” continued the Captain, warming up to the subject, “that a young writer does not receive the recognition he deserves. I claim he *does*. Nothing can keep talent down. The real trouble with the literature of to-day is that the standard of criticism is not more severe. The way to literary celebrity is made easy and smooth, not narrow and hard as in the days of the Scottish Reviewers—the result being this, that Father Time has to kill off car-goes of imitators and pretenders that never should have been permitted to afflict the public.”

“We are wandering,” said the poet. “Hear me: I tell you the trade-mark *does* influence the public, though the thing sold may be as juiceless and insipid as a sucked lemon. A poem over the signature of Bryant, Whittier or Tennyson has the preference though it may

be inferior to 'The Rain on the Roof,' and a thousand other gems that fail to receive the golden opinion of the magazines. Established houses in the world of business have preference with the people. Reputation goes as far in literature as in commerce."

"Yes," broke in the artist, emphatically, "and poems have been lauded to the skies in the heyday of a poet's fame that fell dead from the press when he was in obscurity."

"Why," continued the artist, "does the publisher call to eminent authors for more when there is no more? When a well is pumped empty it would seem to accord with common sense to go where there is water—fresh water, if you please, gushing from a hitherto unknown spring. Hundreds of productions are flaunted daily in our faces because celebrated authors wrote them, copied and reproduced by the press till the market is choked with literary rubbish."

"Unfit for the scrap-heap," interrupted the actor, swinging merrily from one side of the question to the other. "The stuff ought to be bucked and gagged, and rolled up like a ball of stale popcorn and thrown out of the car window."

"At which unhappy juncture came a journalistic gust, Which the rival designated as a most atrocious thrust."

"Where is the Red-eyed Law?" shrieked the loquacious author.

"And the Grand Jury?" added the actor. "Conspiracy!" the editor cries. On which the actor asks, "Who says so?" "Anybody!—I say so!" cries the editor. To which the artist adds sarcastically, "Oh, indeed!" Followed by the actor's blunt retort, "Yes,

indeed!" And then—to give figurative meaning to the lines—

"There was a shadowy remembrance of a group of
three or four
Who were seemingly dissecting another on the floor."

By which time the sidewalk and the hotel lobby were in such a combustible state that it took an adjournment and the remainder of the night to cool things down.

Such in substance (with a little spice from Dickens) is an epitome of the contention that gave birth to that curiosity known to literary history as the "Poe Poem"—the clash of *words*, so to speak, that preceded Riley's resolution to test his dictum, that a poem to be successful and popular must have as its author a genius known to fame. Things were happening to justify his position. The graceful poem, "A Country Pathway," had recently been returned to its author a second time. Already Myron Reed was sending a Riley poem to a New York magazine. Once a year for six years the magazine declined the poem. Its author was unknown. The seventh year it was accepted. Riley had then published his first book; he was at the door of an auspicious future.

The Poe-Poem venture was an innocent collusion with deception. It never entered Riley's head to prolong the deceit. As soon as he had won his point, he would explain all to the satisfaction of all. "I wanted," said he, "to chuck the poem in the face of my opponents as proof of my position." When older he usually evaded the subject but, if pressed for comment, was sometimes reminded of an innocent pioneer farmer, who had been haled before a country squire for larceny. "I was arrested for

stealin' shoats," said the famer, "and the wust of it wuz, the prosecution come darn near provin' it." Riley was innocent of any desire to deceive the public permanently, "but the critics," said he, "came darn near proving me a crafty Pecksniff."

Riley was not the first in that hapless field. Authors before him had feigned the literary style of other writers. One hundred years before, Thomas Chatterton had published certain poems, which he claimed had been written by a monk in the fifteenth century. Riley celebrated the centenary of the event by a little counterfeit of his own. William Ireland, a London author, as told in his *Confessions*, had produced a tragedy, purported to have been written by Shakespeare, which drew a crowded house at Drury Lane, Kemble playing the principal part.

Nor was it Riley's first offense. He had been a party to jolly stratagems from his youth. In his school-days, as editor of the *Criterion*, he connived with the editor of the *Amendment*, the rival school paper, and wrote editorials for it in abuse of himself and the *Criterion*—"the badly bruised and shattered *Criterion* is now sinking lower and lower in the corrosive scale of self-esteem," and so forth. As the reader has seen, he was party to a big-sign ruse when his crafty confederate while painting the bridge at Anderson, fell from the ladder into the river.

Having decided on the literary ruse, the first thing was the choice of an author. One of Reynolds' pleasant delusions was the fancy that the divinity of Michael Angelo inspired him in his productions—"he was ever calling on his name—invoking him by his works." Similar delusions haunted Riley's fancy; indeed, had been a source of diversion ever since he had read the

"British Books." When he wrote a "clever imitation" he invoked the influence of the author he was attempting to reflect. "Looking over the list of the dead poets," said Riley, "I selected Poe because I thought he would enjoy the joke. He had been a little in the hoaxing line himself—his 'Balloon Hoax' for instance—and would not care if I took some liberty with his name."

A second reason for choosing Poe for the ruse was Riley's fellow-feeling for the author and his style. He liked Poe's insistence upon "an even, metrical flow in versification." He thought of him as "one looking from an eminence rather than from the ordinary level of humanity." There was something—he had not experienced it to Poe's pitch of frenzy—something by which he more fully comprehended the true proportions of "that marred and broken individuality, that nature so sensitively organized and so rarely developed, under circumstances exceptionally perilous and perverting." He sympathized with Poe's hopeless despair.

The "Jingling Editor" was interested in the fact that "The Bells" had been composed and finished in the year of his birth. While "grinding business to an edge," he had had a little fun, at Poe's expense, with some dry goods merchants, the Bell Brothers. (Doubtless Poe did not enjoy the joke, but the "Crank" was not considering that phase of it then.)

HAPPY BELLS!

What a list of rare inducements their advertising tells!
How they dance adown the gamut
To the lowest of the less,
And crowd it on and ram it
Through the gangway to success!
And unrivaled in low prices,

How they lift and loom alone
Far above the low devices
And the tricks the trade has known;
And even mounting higher
Up the ringing rounds of fame,
How they lift the eager buyer
To an altitude the same,
Till the customers transported
With the glory they have courted,
Throw their happy-haunted hats
To the bats—bats—bats
And hop and whoop and howl
And prance around and yowl
Till they drive the chorus crazy with their suicidal yells
To the tintinnabulations of the *Bells! Bells! Bells!*

Choosing an author for the ruse was one thing, writing a poem for it a different and more difficult thing. It was "writing to order," a thing that Riley seldom successfully did. It was a mad venture.

In April, soon after his arrival in Anderson, he had written "Orlie Wilde." He thought of that "fanciful fishermaid."

. "He saw her fly
In reckless haste adown a crag,
Her hair a-flutter like a flag
Of gold that danced across the strand
In little mists of silver sand."

The marine myth however scarcely met the requirements. It was Poe-ish, in a way, Poe-ish in theme, but he could not make it Poe-ish in poetic structure. After wrestling with the poem several nights in the *Democrat* office, Riley spent a night at the home of his Graphic Chum, the old boarding house on Bolivar Street, wherein originated "The Object Lesson" and other bantlings of his Graphic days. "On that solemn summer night" (Saturday, July 7, 1877) "I could not sleep," said he.

"I fancied a man idly walking about in the darkness waiting for the birth of his child—then the birth and the murmur of something from the Heaven-sent visitor, followed by the father's interpretation of the murmur as a message to him. While my chum snored away in peace, I rose, seating myself in my bed-gown by a window. I made a rough draft of the poem that had been floating like nebula in the chaos of my thought. From the sky over Anderson there came the idea to make the 'little lisper' float away as a dream on the wings of night." He entitled the poem "Leonainie" and made few changes in the first draft.

"Leonainie—Angels named her;
And they took the light
Of the laughing stars and framed her
In a smile of white."

In this Poe mystery there was more than appeared on the face of it. "Leonainie" was not only mysterious to the public but to its author as well.

"How I found it, caught it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to
learn."

A rival editor, quoting a Riley remark, said it was a "poetical fungus which sprang from the decay of high thoughts."

That it was phrased in the morbid, fantastic vein, characteristic of Poe, impartial judges conceded from the first. That the poem had defects was also conceded. "The measure is faulty," said its author, "and there are faulty lines in it—there *purposely* to chafe the intolerable conceit of the critics, for example,

Heaven's glory seemed adorning
Earth with its esteem."

"If Poe wrote that," said a Cincinnati critic after "Leonainie" was printed, "it was when he was in pinafores." Other critics made similar comments, one observing that "*esteem* ruined 'Leonainie.' It is a fatal word in every poem where it is made to rhyme." Meanwhile the author chuckled to himself as did the author of the "Raven" when he confused the critics of Boston.

"Leonainie" contained one line that covered a multitude of literary sins; that the critics could not decry. A host of readers saw imperishable beauty in "God smiled and it was morning." Many hazarded the prophecy that that line would live with such immortal verse as "God is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat," or "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Although "Leonainie" was practically finished, the venture was still in doubt. One day the poet was for it, another day against it.

But his ambition called to him. If his verse had merit, it should have recognition. He would take the risk:

"I have set my life upon the cast,
And I will stand the hazard of the die."

Meantime he was considering a vehicle for the ruse. To print it in the *Democrat*, where there had already appeared a surplus of curiosities, meant that the public would immediately declare the poem a fake. A few days prior, the editor of the *Kokomo Dispatch*, John O. Henderson "had fretted himself to the verge of insanity," according to an exchange, in a mad endeavor to decipher the incomprehensible jingle in "Craqueodoom," whose tattoo on the roof of the dusk, the Artist Chum made more abstruse by a spectral illustration

representing the crankadox, a ghoulish reptile with a mammoth fin and a loop in its tail, standing with one foot on the horn of the moon.

"The quavering shriek of the fly-up-the-creek
Was fitfully wafted afar
To the queen of the Wunks as she powdered her cheek
With the pulverized rays of a star."

"What does it mean?" asked Henderson, commenting in the *Dispatch* on "the gifted" J. W. Riley. "It is the most weird piece of poetic thought we have ever read. It reads like an effusion of some poetic genius of the fable age in which Mother Goose wrote her melodies." The comment pleased the "Jingling Poet" immensely, and he promptly thanked the editor for "the first friendly hand extended him in that period of impenetrable gloom." The result was the choice of the *Kokomo Dispatch* for the ruse—and the following letter breaking the news to the editor:

OFFICE OF THE ANDERSON DEMOCRAT

Todisman & Croan, Proprietors

Anderson, Indiana, July 23, 1877.

Editor *Dispatch*—Dear Sir:

I write to ask a rather curious favor of you. The dull times worry me, and I yearn for something to stir things from their comatose condition. Trusting to find you of like inclination, I ask your confidence and assistance.

This idea has been haunting me:—I will prepare a poem—carefully imitating the style of some popular American poet, deceased, and you may "*give it to the world for the first time*" through the columns of your paper, prefacing it in some ingenious manner, with the assertion that the *original manuscript* was found in the album of an old lady living in your town—and in the handwriting of the poet

imitated—together with signature, etc., etc.—you can fix the story—only be sure to *clinch* it so as to defy the scrutiny of the most critical lens. If we succeed, and I think sheer audacity sufficient capital to assure that end,—after “working up” the folks, and smiling over the encomiums of the Press, don’t you know; we will then “rise up William Riley,” and bu’st our literary balloon before a bewildered and enlightened world!!!

I write you this in all earnestness and confidence, trusting you will favor the project with your valuable assistance. It will be obvious to you why I do not use our paper here. Should you fall in with the plan, write me at once, and I will prepare and send the poem in time for your issue of this week. Hoping for an early and favorable response, I am

Very truly yours,
J. W. RILEY.

Had the letter dropped from a balloon the *Dispatch* had not been more surprised. Its editor, an energetic, enthusiastic young man, was about Riley’s age. He appreciated good literature, and particularly the poetic gifts of his new friend, so his prompt answer was to be expected:—

THE DISPATCH
Kokomo, Indiana, July 23, 1877.

J. W. Riley,
My Dear Sir:

Your favor of this date is just received. Your idea is a capital one and is cunningly conceived. I assure you that I “tumble” to it with eagerness. You are doubtless aware that newspaper men, as a rule, would rather sacrifice honor, liberty, or life itself, than to deviate from the paths of truth—but the idea of getting in a juicy “scoop” upon the rural exchanges, causes me to hesitate, consider, yea, consent to this little act of journalistic deception. Yes, my dear Riley, I am with you boots and soul. But hadn’t I better forestall the

poem by a "startling announcement" or something of the sort one week before its publication? The public would then be on the tiptoe of expectancy and so forth. I merely offer this as a suggestion. We would be hardly able to publish the poem, if of any length, this week. Copy is well in for Thursday's issue now, save local paragraphs. Send copy as soon as you can and we can print next week. If you like, you may also write the preface as you have indicated. Perhaps you could do it better than I. I enclose this letter in a plain envelope to disarm suspicion. Let me hear from you.

Fraternally,

J. O. HENDERSON.

Mum's the word.

For a fortnight events happened rapidly. † July twenty-seventh, the editor acknowledged receipt of the poem with suggestions for its publication. "It is really Poe-etical," he wrote, "a matchlessly conceived poem. It certainly would not detract from Poe's genius to father the fugitive. I assure you it is withal a marvelous and rare creation, honoring you and the State as well. Have not yet matured my story, but will have it in due time."

Riley's mind did indeed brim with "startling announcements," but scarcely had he prepared one when he weakened and tried another. The thought of after-claps took the granite out of his courage. At the last he asked the Kokomo editor to "weave the fabric in his own loom. Select the most feasible plan," he added, "and nip it at once; were I to prepare the story, the trick might be betrayed in some peculiarity of composition."

He first thought of an old washerwoman, who should have an old album or an old book of some kind from which a blank leaf could be torn. Then he remembered

that an old woman could not keep a secret. When interviewed by the curious she was likely to speak out at the wrong time and let the ruse down prematurely. To avert this danger he suggested an old wood-sawyer. If the old chap did not have an old book, the editor was to get one, and when the curious called to see it, as they most certainly would, they were to be told that it had been sent to W. D. Howells of the *Atlantic*, or some other eminent critic, for inspection.

But the most "startling announcement" of all was this:—In a dark corner of a walnut woods, somewhere in the neighborhood of Cornstalk Post Office, on Wild Cat Creek, Howard County, obscured by the rocks of the Devonian Age, the editor of the *Dispatch* was to find a cave in the side of a hill. (It has been remarked there is not a hill in the county big enough for a prairie dog; there *is*, however.) The editor while out hunting was to get lost in a terrific storm and grope his way through the dismal darkness to a faint light in the cave, where he was to find a hunch-backed dwarf, who grudgingly was to give him shelter from the storm. While the hermit prepared a meal over a bed of coals on the rocky floor, the editor was to find an old book on a rickety table, and turning through it was to espy on a fly leaf the lines in manuscript of an old poem signed E. A. P. The hermit, very uncommunicative at first, was at last to inform the editor the book had been brought from Virginia.

A very spectacular tale, but not at all plausible, in the opinion of the editor. He was to be the hero and go out hunting—he "had never handled a gun in his life." He was to get lost in a storm in his own county, and take refuge in a hermit's den—another impossible thing. The editor promptly rejected the scheme as

“a dead give-away of the plot,” and instead took into his confidence a meat merchant of Kokomo. Having eliminated the impossible plans, they determined on the following story, which was printed with the poem in the *Dispatch*, August 2, 1877:

POSTHUMOUS POETRY

A Hitherto Unpublished Poem of the Lamented Edgar Allan Poe—Written on the Fly Leaf of an Old Book Now in Possession of a Gentleman of This City.

The following beautiful posthumous poem from the gifted pen of the erratic poet, Edgar Allan Poe, we believe has never before been published in any form, either in any published collection of Poe's now extant, or in any magazine or newspaper of any description; and until the critics shall show conclusively to the contrary, *The Dispatch* shall claim the honor of giving it to the world.

That the poem has never before been published, and that it is a genuine production of the poet whom we claim to be its author, we are satisfied from the circumstances under which it came into our possession, after a thorough investigation. Calling at the house of a gentleman of this city the other day, on a business errand, our attention was called to a poem written on the blank fly leaf of an old book. Handing us the book he observed that it (the poem) might be good enough to publish, and that if we thought so, to take it along. Noticing the initials, E. A. P., at the bottom of the poem, it struck us that possibly we had run across a “bonanza,” so to speak, and after reading it, we asked who its author was, when he related the following bit of interesting reminiscence: He said he did not know who the author was, only that he was a young man, that is, he was a young man when he wrote the lines referred to. He had never seen him himself, but heard his grandfather, who gave him the book containing the

verses, tell of the circumstances and the occasion by which he, the grandfather, came into possession of the book. His grandparents kept a country hotel, a sort of a wayside inn, in a small village called Chesterfield, near Richmond, Va. One night, just before bedtime, a young man, who showed plainly the marks of dissipation, rapped at the door and asked if he could stay all night, and was shown to a room. When they went to his room the next morning to call him to breakfast, he had gone away and left the book, on the fly leaf of which he had written the lines given below.

Further than this our informant knew nothing, and being an uneducated, illiterate man, it was quite natural that he should allow the great literary treasure to go for so many years unpublished.

That the above statement is true, and our discovery no canard, we will take pleasure in satisfying anyone who cares to investigate the matter. The poem is written in Roman characters, and is almost as legible as print itself, although somewhat faded by the lapse of time. Another peculiarity in the manuscript which we notice is that it contains not the least erasure or a single interlineated word. We give the poem ("Leonainie") verbatim—just as it appears in the original.

Nearly a score of years later the poet included the poem in his volume, *Armazindy*.

"Dear, *dear* Henderson—and I have a notion to call you *darling*," wrote Riley on reading the *Dispatch*. "The 'Leonainie' introductory is superb. As for the leading paragraph, a neater, sweeter lie was never uttered. I fancy Poe himself leans tiptoe over the walls of Paradise and perks an eager ear to listen and believe." Again he cautioned the *Dispatch* to guard "the imposition with jealous care. Let no one know it—not even your *mother-in-law*, if you possess so near and dear a relative. I shake your hand in silence and in tears. In the language of Artemus Ward—"I am here—I think so—Even of those." "

All the *Dispatch* had to do was to smile inwardly, with "a lack-lustre, dead blue eye," and await the unfolding of a curious future. Have faith in the "orphan venture." Await developments. Eventually the "euchred public would not only forgive, but render homage."

"Mum was the word" at Anderson. The author of "Leonainie" did not chalk things on the walls, nor cry them on the streets. He was a sort of Mr. Tulkinghorn, the "Sphinx," knowing all sorts of things and never telling them. July twenty-fifth, he admitted to the "circle of secrecy" Mrs. D. M. Jordan of the *Richmond Independent*—"that charming child of song whose melody ripples round a happy world." And he did wisely. Throughout the gloom then gathering just beyond the horizon, she was his steadfast champion. Her pen, as well as her eyes, was capable of great expression.

Good Friend (Riley wrote): I write—not in answer to your letter, for I haven't time to do that justice now—but to ask of you a very special favor.

I have made arrangements with the editor of the *Kokomo Dispatch* that he shall publish the poem "Leonainie," under the guise of its being the work of Poe himself. He, Henderson, is to invent an ingenious story of how the original manuscript came into his possession, and when it appears with a hurrah from the *Dispatch* I shall copy and comment upon it in the *Democrat*—in a way that will show that I have no complicity, and I want you to review it, if you will, favorably, in the *Independent*—I don't want you to really admire it—but I do want you to pretend to, and eulogize over it at rapturous length, and as though you were assured it was in reality the work of Poe himself—as the *Dispatch* will claim. Our object is to work up the "Press" broadcast if possible, and then to unsack the feline, and

let the "secret laughter that tickles all the soul" erupt volcanically. The "Ring" around the literary torpedo as it now lies includes but four persons, including yourself, and it must be the unwavering resolve of every member to hold the secret safely fastened in the bosom quartette till time shall have ripened the deception, and the slow match has reached the touch-hole of success.

Now will you do this for me? Write at once, for I shall not be thoroughly happy till the answer which I believe, in your great kindness, you will give, reaches me.

How are you, anyway? Happy, I trust, as am I to sign myself

Your friend,
J. W. RILEY.

The original "ring around the torpedo" (persons to be intrusted with the secret) included thirteen names. Riley discovering the unlucky number, reduced it, but the sequel shows he failed to eliminate the right man.

Immediately on printing and distributing the "Leonainie" issue, the *Dispatch* editor reprinted the poem with a notice calling attention to it on small slips of paper which he mailed to newspapers and magazines (including *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, and the *Atlantic*) with request that they print the poem and give credit to the *Dispatch*. He added that the old book containing the manuscript was in his possession, and further that he would give experts in chirography the privilege of examining it. That was the clever stroke that "excited the comment of the newspaper world." "Leonainie" would not have gone "the rounds of the press like wildfire," had the enterprising editor not mailed the slips to "every State in the Union."

The second day after publication came an inquiry from the "Sphinx" at Anderson:

Editor *Dispatch*,
Dear Sir—

Some literary thug has *gobbled* our *Dispatch* containing your Poe discovery. Please send me two or three extra copies. What does it mean? Are you in earnest? I would like to enter into a correspondence with you regarding it, for even though you be the victim of a deception I would be proud to know your real author. Do I understand from your description that the manuscript is written like printed letters? Write me full particulars and I will serve you in response in any way in my power.

Very truly,
J. W. RILEY.

The "Sphinx" might be garrulous and propose riddles *outside* the "circle of secrecy"—*but never a word within it*. At first he was content to say (editorially in the *Democrat*) that the *Kokomo Dispatch* of yesterday "startles the nation and the hull creation" by publishing a posthumous Poe Poem, "clamorously claiming the honor of its first presentation to the world. Lack of space prevents us from further remark; but we will say, however, that of all the Nazareths now at large, Kokomo is the last from which we would expect good to come."

While "things were developing" Riley bethought himself of a mistake Walter Scott had made in not praising the Waverley novels. Scott's silence was proof to Edinburgh that he wrote them. To avert a like mistake Riley appeared at length editorially in his own paper,—not however till the knowing had begun to think upon his silence with suspicion, particularly the editor of the rival paper, the *Herald*, who expected "a rhapsody of jealous censure from the jaunty sheet across the way." Under the caption, "The Poet Poe in Kokomo," Riley considered in detail



ANDERSON DEMOCRAT OFFICE



OLD COTTAGE ON BOLIVAR STREET
Where "Leonainie" and "The Object Lesson" first saw the light

the merits and the faults of "Leonainie," occasionally deriding the "Poe-ish pretensions" and their claim to verity. He quoted from the "juicy introduction" (in the *Dispatch*) and then paid his compliments to the enraptured editor who had gone into "voluminous detail on the chance discovery of the manuscript in an old book now in possession of an illiterate resident of Kokomo. That gentleman states that his grandpa gave him the book and that it came into the grandpa's possession while in Chesterfield, Virginia. According to the story, a wild-eyed, dissipated young man had stopped in a tavern over night and by morning had flown, having scrawled in the old book over the initials E. A. P., a curious poem. 'Only this and nothing more.' "

Riley frankly admitted, editorially, that on reading the *Dispatch* he was inwardly resolved not to be startled. He had thought to ignore "Leonainie" entirely; but "a sense of justice due—if not to Poe, to the poem"—induced him to let slip a few remarks.

"We have given the matter," he continued, "not a little thought! and in what we shall have to say regarding it, we will say with purpose far superior to prejudicial motives, and with the earnest effort of beating through the gloom a pathway to the light of truth."

Passing by "the many assailable points regarding the birth and late discovery of the poem," he considered first the authenticity of its authorship. "That a poem contains some literary excellence," he said, "is no assurance that its author is a genius known to fame, for how many waifs of richest worth are now afloat upon the literary sea, whose authors are unknown, and whose nameless names have never marked the graves that hid their hidden value from the world. Let us look deeper

down, and pierce below the glare and gurgle of the surface and analyze the poem and Poe's work at its real worth."

And this, Riley proceeded to do. The *theme* was one that Poe would not likely select. "Poe had a positive aversion to children, and especially to babies." The second stanza contained Poe's peculiar bent of thought but in addition "that weird faculty of attractively combining with the delicate and beautiful, the dread and repulsive—a power most rarely manifest, and quite beyond the bounds of imitation." The third stanza was secondary in thought and the fourth in part mediocre. It was fair to conclude, since "Poe avoided the name of Deity," that he did not write the last stanza.

"To sum up the poem as a whole we are at some loss," Riley concluded. "It most certainly contains rare attributes of grace and beauty; and although we have not the temerity to accuse the gifted Poe of its authorship, for equal strength of reason we cannot deny that it is his production; but as for the enthusiastic editor of the *Dispatch* we are not inclined, as yet, to the belief that he is wholly impervious to the wiles of deception."

There was a flourish of county paper trumpets in that first fortnight of August, 1877. The two innocent deceivers were kept wide awake. It was hurry and hurrah. As Riley put it:

"On with the ruse! let fakes be unconfined:
No sleep till morn when bards and critics meet
To chase the flaming hours with flying feet."

In a brief note, he hopes the *Dispatch* is not losing faith. "God bless us, we are certainly at the very threshold of success. Hold the fort! If we could *talk* for one square hour we could make *ourselves* believe it."

August thirteenth brought another letter from the *Dispatch*. "Your two letters of Saturday received," wrote the editor. "I would like to visit you but cannot get away. Have you seen notice in *New York World*, *Tribune*, *Post*; *Chicago Tribune*, *Inter-Ocean*; Cincinnati papers, *Courier Journal*? I am saving all notices and will publish them next week. Your notice in the *Democrat* is capital; so is *Herald's* but it sounds like you all over." (The editor made a good guess; the plot was thickening. It was Riley all over: one editor of the *Herald* had been admitted to the "ring around the torpedo.") "Our plot is developing rapidly," the *Dispatch* editor continued; "the ball is fairly in motion and will not stop until it has reached every state in the Union. No article was ever published in a country paper in this State that has had such a run as this has and will have. The end is not yet. I am anxious to see *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, and so forth. They are the critics. Send all extracts you find."

August sixteenth the *Dispatch* had just received a letter from William F. Gill of Boston, who had written a new life of Poe. Gill had the manuscript of "The Bells" and could identify the Kokomo manuscript by it. "What shall I write him?" asks the *Dispatch*. "Where is the original manuscript? Notices still come from the South. Send me all your clippings."

Where was the original manuscript, indeed? In the issue of August sixteenth, the *Dispatch* referred to the old book containing the manuscript, inadvertently saying that "the book—the property of a gentleman of this city—is now in our possession." This, Riley good-naturedly considered "the fatal blunder of the *Dispatch* editor." Within a week the editor discovered that Riley, swayed by an old tie of friendship rather than

by good judgment, had admitted to the "circle of secrecy" one who could not keep a secret. That was Riley's "fatal blunder," and as the sequel proved, the "more fatal of the two."

The consequences of the editor's mistake were visited on him immediately. *There was no manuscript*. Poe's biographer offered to deposit any amount in Boston for its safe return. The editor turned a deaf ear to his plea. Representatives from the city dailies wrote about it and "literary folks called in droves to see it." "What shall we do?" wailed the editor. "Hold them off a few days more," wrote Riley. "It certainly is as easy to make a manuscript as it was to write the poem that creates the sensation."

Then there was a stir in Anderson. Two friends, W. J. Ethell and Samuel Richards, who were never far from their "jingling" comrade when he was driven into a corner, worked unceasingly on a manuscript, imitating Poe's handwriting from a facsimile of the original manuscript of "The Bells." The facsimile did not contain all the letters required and Richards, who made the final draft, had necessarily to do some inventing. And he did it well. "In some way," said Riley, "my friend caught the spirit of the whole vocabulary, furnishing a result that bewildered many notable and exacting critics." Edmund Clarence Stedman remarked that it was the best imitation of Poe he had seen. Richards copied the lines on the fly leaf of an old *Ainsworth Dictionary* procured from a law office and bought originally at a second-hand bookstore on Delaware Street, Indianapolis. This done, Riley deftly concealed the old book in brown wrapping paper and boarded the Pan Handle accommodation for Kokomo. "That accommodation," said he, "never carried a more restless pas-

AN
ABRIDGMENT
OF
AINSWORTH'S DICTIONARY,
English and Latin,
DESIGNED FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS.

BY
THOMAS MORELL, D. D.

CAREFULLY CORRECTED AND IMPROVED FROM THE LAST
LONDON QUARTO EDITION BY JOHN CAREY, LL. D.

PHILADELPHIA:
PUBLISHED BY URIAH HUNT & SON,
No. 44 N. Fourth Street,
AND FOR SALE BY BOOKSELLERS GENERALLY THROUGHOUT THE
UNITED STATES.

senger. I was so fearful of detection, a shadow scared me. I was even destitute of *Dutch* courage.

'Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on
And turns no more his head,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.'

A thousand things I thought might happen. A wag might snatch the dictionary from me. I might drop dead of apoplexy. The train might be ditched by the Jabberwock and my name might be found among the dead. The brakeman and train-boy might bury me and my old book on the spot. There was some consolation in that. That would be a *bona fide* secret. Never yet, so history shows, has the grave unsacked a feline."

On that trip to Kokomo Riley began to note what the car wheels were saying. He called it the "agony of the rails." All the way over they repeated the dubious refrain, "How *fur* is it?—how *fur* is it?—how *fur* is it?" Sometimes that refrain, "stoical and relentless as fate, grew so agonizing that it would lift him from his seat and drag him up and down the aisle."

"Thirty-five miles," said Riley, recalling the experience, "and every mile a reach of torment." Riley had doubts that the ruse would succeed even after his friend had written in imitation of Poe's hand. This accounts for his gloomy state of feeling on the way to Kokomo.

"One day," said Mr. Henderson, long years after, when serving his commonwealth as auditor of state, "one day I was well-nigh crazy worrying over the absence of the manuscript. It was a hot evening and I was alone in the *Dispatch* office, when a red-mustached,

rough-looking young fellow, far from the sleek literary man he is to-day, came in and introduced himself as J. W. Riley. That was our first meeting. The surprise was mutual. Both expected to meet an older man. "The burden is fallen from me!" I exclaimed, when I saw that dictionary. Well, we held a council of war. Things were moving along swimmingly. I remained at my desk; Riley went for a few days' rest to Greenfield."

Before leaving Kokomo Riley made a call on his young friend of the *Kokomo Tribune*, Charles Phillips.

"What are you doing here?" asked Phillips.

"Over to see that manuscript."

"Bloomy moonshine!" returned Phillips, contemptuously. "They have no manuscript. Got it under lock and key, I suppose!" he added with withering irony.

Riley was disinclined to talk where others could hear. "Have you a room where we could be alone?" he whispered. They went upstairs, where, on entering a room, Riley cautiously looked round, peeped into the closet and locked the door and windows. Each moment Phillips' curiosity grew less controllable. "I don't like these flickerings of light on the wall," said Riley. "They seem to take the shape of letters and words. Are you sure no one can hear? Are there no cracks in the wall?"

Being assured, a solemn silence followed—it seemed an hour to Phillips—while Riley still kept peeping here and there about the room. Finally, leaning against the wall—"a picture of despair with tears brimming over his eyelids,"—he said, "I came—I came all the way from Anderson to see that manuscript." Phillips thought from the tone of disappointment in his voice that the *Dispatch* had refused to let him see it. Sud-

denly advancing to Phillips, he whispered with measured breath and slow—"They have—they have—yes, sir—they have the manuscript."

Then he went into details concerning the authenticity of the poem. The *Dispatch* should guard it with jealous care. "The dear old book," he said, "is kept under double lock and key. It was only after tearful pleadings that I was permitted a sight of it. I heaved a sigh of relief when the faded volume was once more locked in the safe."

"Leoloony—Leoloony," repeated Phillips, as they descended the stairs. "Leoloony," repeated his guest at parting. On the train to Greenfield "Leoloony" came prancing from Riley's fancy in foolish jingle:

"Leoloony, angels called her;
And they took the bloom
Of the tickled stars and walled her
In her *nom de plume*."

"How this world is given to lying!" remarked Phillips, a few days later when he discovered the *real* situation. Recalling those artificial tears, and the night and the noiseless presence of invisible spectators, he thought Riley should seek his fortune on the stage. "He could make," said Phillips, "one of the matchless actors of his time."

While Riley was recruiting at Greenfield, the *Dispatch* was living in clover. The editor had full possession of the field. Each day brought "fresh evidence of success. The *New York Herald* had nibbled, and the *New York Sun*. Sailing before the wind, 'Leonainie' was destined to see and be known in distant lands." Whether favorably or unfavorably known was not nearly so important as to make the "big dailies stand on their heads and bark furiously." "A new-found

poem," said the *Nashville American*, "has been charged to Edgar A. Poe. If that gentleman ever wanders anywhere in spirit, he will surely pay his respects to the scalp of the Indiana man that wrote it." "The poem bears no internal evidence of Poe's paternity," said the *Indianapolis News*. "Romantic enough," said the *Brooklyn Eagle*,—"looks altogether like romance. The story is wild enough to have been written under the influence of Egyptian whiskey." "The unfortunate Poe," said the *Baltimore American*, "was doubtless guilty of many indiscretions, but it is hard to suppose that in his most eccentric moods he would have attempted to foster upon his fame the name of 'Leonainie.'" "A poem is going the rounds of the press," said the *Philadelphia Commonwealth*, "having been discovered among the rubbish of a Hoosier literary club by a lunatic of Kokomo. Two or three lines will show its spirit and style:

'And they made her hair of gloomy
Midnight, and her eyes of bloomy
Moonshine, and they brought her to me
In the solemn night.'

The gin mills of Maryland and the Old Dominion never turned out liquor bad enough to debase the genius of Poe to the level of that verse. It is a libel on his memory to hint of such doleful idiocy."

The big dailies did "bark furiously"—no doubt of that. From Boston through Washington to Mobile and New Orleans, and back through Richmond and across the continent to San Francisco, the comment was about equally divided between hisses and applause.

"Abusive, insinuating, malevolent," observes the reader. Precisely so, and precisely the thing required. The hammering process is as essential in the evolution

of a poet as in the making of a soldier. "We say words in the moonlight," said the soldierly Myron Reed, "that we do not stand up to in the daytime. When the band plays and there is cheering and the girls are waving handkerchiefs, it is easy to enlist 'for three years or the war'; but afterwards, south of the Ohio, plugging along in the mud—that is different." It was one thing for Riley to receive applause,—but hisses were different. Nevertheless they were decisive factors. They were the test. If he could withstand them he might be worthy of renown. The author of "Leonainie" had much to say about the "sublime satisfaction and proud complacency" of the critic. Yet that despised critic was a means of making him serviceable to mankind. The critic hammers the self-sufficiency out of young writers.

While gathering poems for another book, he was inclined to rewrite "Leonainie" before including it in the volume; but, "since the nimbus round it," as he said, "is historical rather than poetical," he finally permitted the lines to remain as they were originally written.

Many newspapers charged the paternity of "Leonainie" to the editor of the *Dispatch*. "They do me too much honor," retorted the editor. "The furor is in its incipency," he said editorially August twenty-third. "The poem is traveling on the wind. The ablest critics of the land have leveled their lenses upon it. If we have been the victim of a deception, we are willing as anybody to know it. We believe in the paternity of the poem and can wait with complacency the verdict of the reading public. The original manuscript together with the book from which the leaves were torn is now in our posses-

sion. The book is one of an old edition of *Ainsworth's Dictionary*, considerably time-worn. The poem is written in pale ink of a bluish tinge on the fly leaf taken from the back of the book. The chirography is remarkably clear and can be read as easily as print. Of course it is somewhat dimmed by time and exposure. It is written on both pages of a single leaf. The manuscript will be sent East to critics for examination and judgment. The poem is indeed remarkable, and its accidental discovery is a valuable contribution to American literature."

While Riley was resting at Greenfield things were developing over at Anderson. An event there that concerns the issue of the Poe-Poem venture was the conversation of two men on Sunday night, August 19, 1877. They had entered the corner of the Court House yard and seated themselves under a Carolina poplar. They had been talking very earnestly at the restaurant. As Riley said, "they had thawed their grief with steaming coffee and their hearts had grown warm over their woes." He went on to describe their surroundings and the night. "The people," he said, "were home from church with the supreme satisfaction that attends tired pilgrims at the close of the sweet day of rest. Lovers were cooing quietly in pleasant hiding-places and old folks were dreaming of toll-gates and splint-bottomed chairs. The alleys were fragrant with tin cans and virtuous herbs. The leaves and flowers, birds and beasts, and creeping things in the grass and on the back porch were performing their functions in the usual manner. At the edge of town the broad expanse of cornfields stretched away to the purple woods, and in the distance the solar system worked respectfully at its appointed task."

The two men under the Carolina poplar were James McClanahan and Stephen Metcalf, one of the proprietors of the *Anderson Herald*. "The time has come for this bubble to burst," said McClanahan, referring to the Poe Poem—nine simple words but they were charged with the constituents of gunpowder. They were uttered by the man who again and again had signed himself, "Yours forever, European Balsam." He had been admitted to the "circle of secrecy" around the literary torpedo and could no longer keep the secret. "The dear boy!" how came he to break the seal of confidence? How came he to drop a firebrand on the path of "the dearest friend he had on earth"—he who had found that friend a luckless disconsolate in overalls and bowled away with him to a legendary world—who had wandered with him up hill and down dale in search of the Golden Fleece—who had drifted away to the Wisconsin woods and brought him tidings of the "Golden Girl"—how came he in the tense moments of a hapless venture to be disobedient to a trust? "Nobody knows," said an intimate friend, "but him and the 'Sphinx' and neither is saying anything." It is an unraveled riddle. There was a ratchet loose somewhere but certain it is that the Graphic Chum did not disobey his trust maliciously. Riley was not embittered by the part he played. "We are friends," he said, "and will be in the Dim Unknown."

The hour had struck for the *Anderson Herald*. For weeks it had been chaffing over the success of the *Democrat*. Its subscription list had suffered from the popularity of the "Jingling Editor." At last it had a journalistic "scoop" with dimensions. The time had come for it to "lash its rival with its lighting." Mon-

day morning the "secret" was walking up and down the streets. There was an envious chatter among compositors in the *Herald* composing room—

"Sockety—hockety—wockety wump—
Pillikum—pollikum—plumpty pump."

"Your Poe Poem has assumed a new phase here," wrote the faithful William M. Croan of the *Democrat*. "The *Herald* has just got wind of it and swears it will expose the entire thing in coming issue. I write you as a friend warning you of the danger."

Croan's warning reached Riley Monday night. At first he was dizzy over the threatened revelation. He could not realize it. "And this is life, I believe. Oh, certainly. Why not?" he muttered to himself in the mock-heroic way of Dick Swiveller. As the hours wore on to midnight the complications overwhelmed him. He and his friends had striven strenuously. He thought of the two weeks past as a perilous chariot drawn by a double span of horses and driven by an orphan. A master hand would have driven a winning race. Now the horses' legs were outside the traces and they were pulling and twisting every which way. Just my luck, thought he; "the cat's away and the mice they play; the frost breaks up and the water runs. Edgar Allan Poe"—he moaned dolefully—"just thirteen letters—*unlucky for Poe—unlucky for everything connected with him.*"

The opportune moment having arrived, the exposé was sprung,—but not in the *Herald*, as the *Democrat* expected. The *Herald* proprietor could not make his threat good. One of his associates—the "rival editor" in the war of words that preceded Riley's de-

cision to test his theory—in some unaccountable manner had been admitted to the “ring around the torpedo.” While he freely hammered the “Jingling Poet,” he would not carry his cudgeling to the breach of a trust. Though “cold and metallic in face,” said Riley, “his heart was soft and warm as the heart of youth.” The *Herald* therefore had to content itself with sending the exposé to its friendly neighbor, the *Kokomo Tribune*, which, according to its rival, the *Dispatch*, “jumped for the sensation as a bullfrog would leap for a red flannel bait.”

The *Herald* quoted its friendly contemporary with ghoulish glee: “Upon our first page,” it said editorially, “we present the *Tribune’s* exposure of the poetical fraud ‘Leonainie.’ We are sorry that Mr. J. W. Riley should have proven himself so mendacious, and sorrier still that he is the author of the poem. We might have forgiven him his want of veracity but it is hard to condone ‘Leonainie.’”

The exposé was of course a feat for the newspapers. It was not “the little stir among the state exchanges,” which Riley anticipated when he launched the venture. The critics began to “erupt volcanically.”

The exchanges had a great deal to say about “a literary forgery,” and the dead Poe, the “chief victim,” who was powerless to avenge the wrong done his name and honor. As they saw it, the Poe Poem and the “verse carpenter” who wrote it, deserved the opprobrium heaped upon them. Saucy weeklies talked volubly about “a great fraud,” “insufferable nonsense,” the “unscrupulous young man,” and “an exceedingly foolish piece of criminality.” A Detroit daily regretted that the American people had been deluded into the idea that there really does exist in Indiana a place by the

name of Kokomo. "The poem," said a New York daily, "effectually sets at rest whatever suspicion there may have been that the author had the material out of which a poet is made." Many journals saw "an impassable gulf" between Riley and fame. "A brilliant career had been blighted and forever lost to the literary world."

When abuse had run its course, the *Kokomo Dispatch* summed up the situation as follows:—

"Our object in the ruse was two-fold, both of which have been accomplished: First, to perpetuate a quiet pleasant joke, which we would afterward explain; second, to give Mr. Riley's genius as a poet a fair, full and impartial test before the ablest critics in the land, uninfluenced by local prejudice or sectional bias. The only fiction about the transaction was the Poe story. The poem possesses a vast deal of merit, and would do no violence to the reputation of our more pretentious bards of today. Although it has been roughly criticized in certain quarters, it has been praised as the work of genius in others. No poem ever passed through a more relentless gauntlet of criticism. None has ever had a more general reproduction by the press. Mr. Riley is a young poet of great promise and will we predict yet make his mark as one of the sweetest singers of the age."

In the hopeful meantime—although it seemed hopeless—what was the fate of the "Verse Carpenter"? To give a fanciful turn to a fanciful incident, as related by his comrade Nye, the literary fledgling had leaned from his high chair far out to catch a dainty, gilded butterfly, and lost his footing and with a piercing shriek had fallen headlong to the gravel walk below; and when he was picked up, he was—he was a poet. But he was a poet caught *in the arms of doom*. Instead of drifting

away from him like a dream, "Leonainie" had returned, the *enfant terrible*.

The depth of despair into which the poet was plunged by the wave of criticism and reproach and its effect on his conduct and literary output are reserved for the next chapter.

Said Riley, years after the exposure, "The tirade and outcries are all smiling material now, but then they were pathos from away-back."

"That fly leaf!" he once protested, plucking the nettle from his past, "how the woof of my destiny has been warped around that. When a schoolboy I wrote my name on a fly leaf of an old reader with enough extra flourish at the bottom for a lasso, wrote it with dreamy speculations of the sensation it would some day create beneath a picture of myself in a cocked hat, a plume, and a ruffled collar—such as Sir Walter Raleigh wore, don't you know. Well, the extra flourish and sensation came when the 'Famous Fake' went bounding through the land. I came so perilously near losing my pelt then that I have been scared from A. to Izzard ever since."

After the whirlwind of comments on "Leonainie," "posthumous poetry" was the talk of the time. Reporters went prowling round neighborhoods in search of clues to mysteries, and when they could not find them, they invented them. An unpublished poem by Bret Harte was found at Effingham, Illinois, while carpenters were tearing down an old schoolhouse. The poem, it was said, was written on narrow strips of manila wrapping paper, in Harte's well-known feminine hand. The author had passed that way while walking from San Francisco to New York, and deposited the poem in the schoolhouse wall. Another posthumous production was found on a headstone in

Iowa. Still another in Virginia—"a poetic fragment written with chalk on the inside of a barn door." *Puck* entertained its readers with "some more bloomy moonshine poetry by the late author of the 'Raven.'" A fisherman with a magnifying-glass described strange hieroglyphics on a turtle shell on the banks of the Wabash—"unquestionably the last work of the gifted but erratic Poe."

"My friends want to know my feelings," said Riley in later years. "I refer them to Mr. Jobling, who saw the storm break on the Western Road out of London. It was the most dismal period of my life. The *Democrat* said I was rustivating a few days at Greenfield. I was *abdicating*. My tinsel throne was crumbling. Friends stood aside—went round the other way. I went out on the porch and sighed like a wet forestick. Even the pump was disinclined to welcome my return. Over at Anderson I saw myself walking alone around the Court House square at night through the drizzle and rain, peering longingly at the dim light in the office where I sometimes slept. Hearts in there were as hard and dark and obdurate as the towel in the composing room. In those hot silent nights I saw the lightning quiver on the black horizon; I heard hollow murmurings in the wind. Within a week I was encysted in pitchy darkness. The lightning was not an optical illusion. It was at hand, crooked, dazzling and resentful. The rain poured down like Heaven's wrath. Every trembling, vivid, flickering instant I breathed in horror of impending doom."

When traveling with his friend Nye, a decade later, time had so mollified his heartache that Riley could joke about it. He once drew a pen and ink sketch of himself chasing his hat in the wind. With one hand he clutched

his "reticule" of poems; with the other he clung to an umbrella turned wrong side out by the gale. Both man and hat were pursued by the wrath of critics—and the rain. "Oh the rain!" he would solemnly repeat to Nye,

"The rain! the rain! the rain!—
Pouring with never a pause,
Over the fields and green byways—
How beautiful it was!"

In the midst of all the noise and distraction of his Poe-Poem days, there was one thing if nothing else that was perfectly clear and that was that the detractors who prophesied oblivion for the "Verse Carpenter," knew nothing about it. His future was not in their keeping. In those hours of darkness, the winds alone were his messengers. Occasionally he was soothed by the whisperings of a gentle zephyr, but for the most part the visitations came in squalls. "I am the Wind," he made the wind say in a poem he was then writing for the *Kokomo Dispatch*,

"I am the Wind, and I rule mankind,
And I hold a sovereign reign
Over the lands as God designed,
And the waters they contain:
Lo! the bound of the wide world round
Falleth in my domain."

There came the last week of August a ray of comfort from an accomplished young woman of Anderson, Miss Jessie Fremont Myers—afterward Mrs. William M. Croan—a prediction that, in the light of subsequent events, may be set over against all the mouthings of his detractors. "I am indeed sorry," she wrote, "that your plan, contrived without a single dishonorable thought or motive, has received such an unmanly

blow just as it is smiling into perfection. But I cannot agree with the *Tribune* that it will result in any serious damage to you for I still believe that the true votaries of genius will still yield you homage and that the laurel wreath fame was twining for your brow, will adorn it as if 'Leonainie' had never been written."

At Anderson also there was a whisper of hope from the Artist Comrade—and a bit of wisdom from a banker, John W. Pence. "There, Little Man," said the banker, "don't cry; the future is before you; go to work." "The day is coming," said the artist to a friend, "when we will be proud we were friends of Riley. His poems have the true ring—he is bound to come to the front." Mrs. Jordan of the *Richmond Independent* wrote some hopeful words about the poetic waif born in the corner of an obscure paper, that was being so mysteriously wafted to periodicals beyond the sea. "Count me an ardent admirer of the lamented Poe," she said. "Let us do what we can to honor the genius of the great departed."

"After sorrowing and parboiling for a fortnight," said Riley, "I resolved to make a clean breast of the whole thing." Accordingly the following:

Greenfield, Indiana, August 29, 1877.

Editor of *Indianapolis Journal*,

Dear Sir:

Will you do me the especial favor of publishing the enclosed in your issue of to-morrow? Very truly,
J. W. RILEY.

The enclosure was his "Card to the Public." The *Journal*, however, like all other papers, after the exposé, was not certain of the card's authenticity. Riley's own handwriting was questioned. On the morrow they published the request as:

THE ALLEGED POE-POEM CARD FROM MR. J. W. RILEY.
To the Public:

Having been publicly accused of the authorship of the poem, "Leonainie," and again of the far more grievous error of an attempt to falsely claim it, I deem it proper to acknowledge the justice of the first accusation. Yes, as much as I regret to say it, I am the author; but in justice to the paper that originally produced it, and to myself as well, I desire to say a few words more.

The plan of the deception was originally suggested to me by a controversy with friends, in which I was foolish enough to assert that "no matter the little worth of a poem, if a great author's name was attached, it would be certain of success and popularity." And to establish the truth of this proposition I was unfortunate enough to select a ruse, that, although establishing my theory, has been the means of placing me in a false light, as well as those of my friends who were good enough to assist me in the scheme; for when we found our literary bombshell bounding throughout the length and breadth of the Union we were so bewildered and involved we knew not how to act. Our only intercourse had been by post, and we could not advise together fairly in that way; in consequence, a fibrous growth of circumstances had chained us in a manner, and a fear of unjust censure combined to hold us silent for so long. To find at last a jocular explosion of the fraud, we thoughtlessly employed a means both ill-advised for ourselves and others. And now, trusting the public will only condemn me for the folly, and hold me blameless of all dishonorable motives wherein I have feigned ignorance of the real authorship of the poem, and so forth, and so forth,

I am yours truly,
J. W. RILEY.

CHAPTER XVIII

WEATHERING THE STORM

THERE is a classic allusion to Arion which typifies Riley's fate the first fortnight of September, 1877. Most provident in peril, says Shakespeare in praise of his hero,

"He bound himself
(Courage and hope both teaching him the practice)
To a strong mast that liv'd upon the sea;
Where like Arion on the dolphin's back,
He held acquaintance with the waves,
So long as I could see."

The Poe-Poem ruse had failed and the exposé had plunged Riley into a sea of despair. He was literally holding acquaintance with waves and winds. He had been the victim of one of those vulgar accidents of life, according to Lord Beaconsfield, that should be borne without a murmur. He did not bear it without a murmur, but he did bear it. He did not sink beneath the weight of woe.

It was all laughing material years after when the experience was "dramatized" in a cartoon for Nye and Riley's *Railway Guide*—the Hoosier Poet riding on the dolphin's back, with a golden wreath on his brow, a lyre in his arms and a tunic flowing in the wind from his shoulders—all merry-making then, but at the time the ordeal, in Riley's words, "was a fortnight of woe for the infernal gods." All that remained of his fatal venture seemed a barren waste surrounded by desolation.

The "fortnight of woe" explains the allusion to Riley as the "Arion of Grief." His fate did indeed rhyme with the narrative in the Age of Fable. Like Arion he was a musician and a great favorite. He longed for recognition in the East. Friends besought him to be content:

"Stay where you are."

"Stay on the *Democrat*."

"Paint signs."

His answer tallied substantially with that in the fable. He longed to make his gift a source of pleasure to others, and the conviction had been borne in upon him that he could do it with song.

That period of gloom like many other seasons of darkness, was brimming with possibilities—proof once more that "man's extremity is God's opportunity." Out of it came a lyric—"We Are Not Always Glad When We Smile"—that in beauty of pathos has few rivals in the English tongue—another instance that our laughter

"With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest
thought."

How could Riley be so gay while his heart was in mourning? How could he smile and even laugh when he felt that, for him, the end of all earthly happiness had come? Hear him—

"We are not always glad when we smile,—
For the heart in a tempest of pain,
May live in the guise
Of a smile in the eyes
As a rainbow may live in the rain:
And the stormiest night of our woe

May hang out a radiant star
Whose light in the sky
Of despair is a lie
As black as the thunderclouds are.

“We are not always glad when we smile:
Though we wear a fair face and are gay,
And the world we deceive
May not ever believe
We could laugh in a happier way.
Yet, down in the deeps of the soul,
Ofttimes with our faces aglow,
There’s an ache and a moan
That we know of alone,
And as only the hopeless may know.”

Such is a glimpse of his woe in verse. He also writes of it in the following letter to a woman he dearly loved, the Lady of Tears he sometimes called her when he thought of the sorrow in her life, Miss Eudora Kate Myers of Anderson—afterward Mrs. William J. Kinsley—

Greenfield, Indiana, September 15, 1877.

Dear Woman:

Your letter of yesterday does me a world of good, for although it hurt in many ways, it showed me still the great strength of your love, and with so great a treasure in my keeping must I not be strong and brave to meet all the ills with true manliness, and not with the coward heart I have shown for so long. You find fault with me for not telling you my trouble, and saying I am not satisfied with your love. You do me wrong—indeed you do! My love for you is so great that I have tried to hold from you only that which would give you extra pain to know and God knows I give you misery enough. Look up here in my face and read the last week’s misery I have passed and you will not offer me a chiding word. I have walked down—down in hell so far that your dear voice had almost failed to reach me, but thank God I can hear you, though I

may not touch your hand till I have washed my own in tears of repentance. My steps are turning gladly toward the light, and it seems to me sometimes I almost see God's face. I have been sick—sick of the soul, for had so fierce a malady attacked the body, I would have died with all hell hugged in my arms. I can speak of this now because I can tell you I am saved, and my noble woman will be filled with joy to know that God bends down and listens to her prayers. In fancy now my arms cling round you as the pilgrim to the cross, and through a storm of tears the sunshine of your smiles breaks on me, as I say,

“The burden has fallen from me—
It is buried in the sea,
And only the sorrow of others
Throws its shadow over me.”

I will not now talk longer of myself—there is no end of that, and I shall not be selfish any more but humble—very, very humble. You must never say again you are not worthy of my love. You could not hurt me deeper. My worth compared with yours, I tell you truly, for I know, “Is as moonlight unto sunlight and as water unto wine.” I'm growing better though and humbly pray that God may brighten up the poor dim remnant of my worth that it at last may shine a jewel of one lustre with your own.

How inexpressibly sorrowful were those autumn weeks of 1877, when alone Riley walked among the great elms on the banks of Brandywine, when

“The long black shadows of the trees
Fell o'er him like their destinies.”

The leaves “dropped on him their tears of dew.” At times he seemed to stand on a beach with its waste of sands before him. “I could hear the roar of breakers,” he said; “low clouds brushed by me—just solitude, wreck and ruin—nothing more.”

It does seem that his fate was to be "fanged with frost and tongued with flame." His station was not to be the tripod of the *Democrat*, nor the grind of any other journalistic field. Like his King of Slumberland, his dais was to be woven of rays of starlight and jeweled with gems of dew, and sometimes he was to occupy a throne wrought of blackest midnight. He was destined to hold communion with those mighty phantoms, *Our Ladies of Sorrow*. In some way unknown to the average mortal the poet was to be kept in touch with the deep silence that reigns in their kingdoms. One shudders at the sound of their mysterious words:—"Suffer not woman and her tenderness to sit near him in his darkness. Banish the frailties of hope; wither the relenting of love; scorch the fountain of tears. So shall he be accomplished in the furnace; so shall he see the things that ought *not* to be seen, sights that are abominable, and secrets that are unutterable. So shall he read the elder truths, fearful truths. So shall he rise again before he dies. And so shall our commission be accomplished which from God we had,—to plague his heart until we had unfolded the capacities of his spirit."

"Every man," said Riley, "has his dragon as well as his Dæmon; in this, sinner and saint are alike. The shining figure of the Dæmon precedes him, the dragon dogs his footsteps. I have my dragon and thereby is established my relation to mankind. Doctor Johnson had his and I take it that is one reason for the abiding interest of the race in what he said and did." In that fortnight immediately following the exposé, the poet was not only suffering from the torture of critics and the shattered hope of literary recognition. His heart

was also breaking over a lapse from sobriety. His dragon seized and shook him as a mastiff. As he expressed it, he was "fighting another battle with the *blue flame*." The channels of his thought had been obscured and his progress imperiled by his "besetting sin." "Friends offered sympathy," he said; "how could they sympathize when their souls had not been bruised with adversity? *They* had not been steeped to the lips in misery; *they* had not seen their fondest hopes perish; *they* had not bared their faces on the earth at night; *they* had not suffered the pangs of humiliation. What could *they* know—

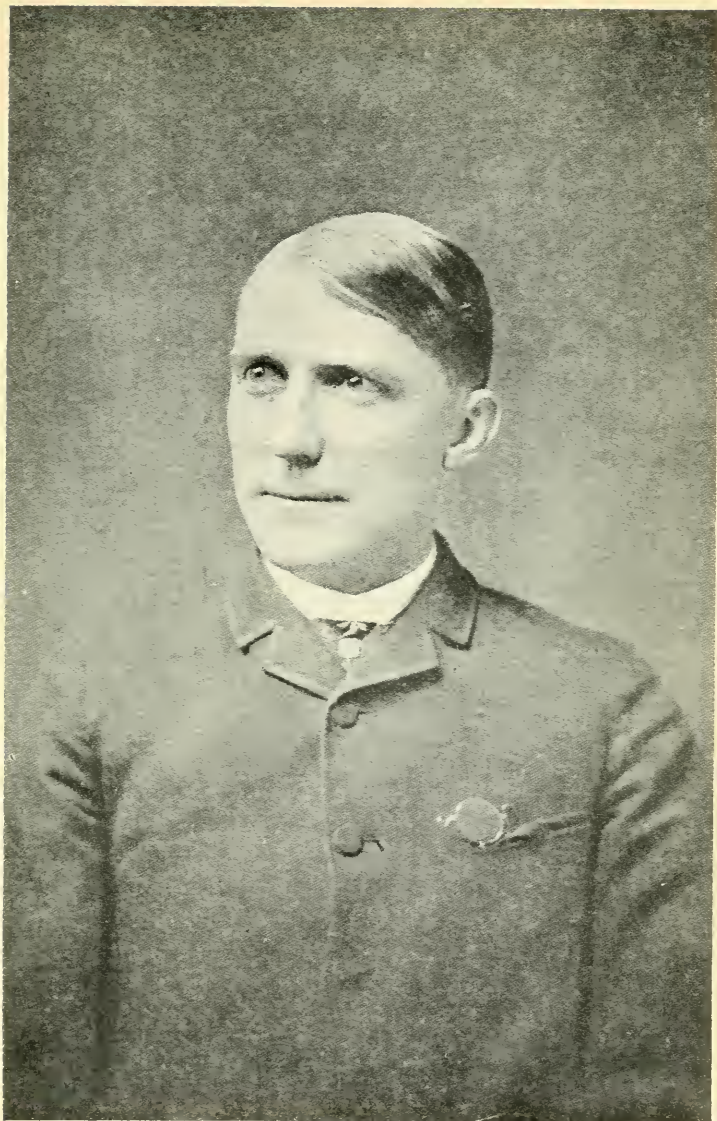
'Of the frenzy and fire of the brain,
That grasps at the fruitage forbidden?'

There are hours in the battle with this disease when a man can breathe no prayer, nor utter a cry, hours when he

'Bends and sinks like a column of sand
In the whirlwind of his great despair.'

Carlyle points out that David, the Hebrew King, was a man of blackest crimes, "no want of sins, yet he was the man according to God's own heart." He had learned the significance of sackcloth and ashes. "Of all acts," says the author, "is not, for a man, *repentance* the most divine? What are faults," he asks, "what are the outward details of a life; if the inner secret of it, the remorse, temptations, true, often-baffled, never-ended struggle of it, be forgotten?" What is a man's life if he is not touched with a feeling of our infirmities?

Repentance is the word that looms large on the poet's horizon after the Poe-Poem episode.



THE POET AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-EIGHT



OLD COUNTY COURT HOUSE
First home of the Township Library

“Pitilessly, year by year
From the farthest past to here,
Fate had fallen like a blight
On the blossoms of delight,”

and he realized as never before that he was chiefly responsible for that fate. Now God was bending down and listening to his prayers—and the prayer of his Lady of Tears. Thus it seemed he “could almost see God’s face.” Had he left no other record of himself than this, he would deserve the homage of fallen humanity everywhere. In that “storm of tears” he mastered himself and made “his torture tributary to his will.” In that eventful time there began “the faithful struggle of an earnest human soul towards what is good and best”—a struggle often baffled but never abandoned. Face to face with the picture of his woe he clung to his purpose. He resolved “not to fade away in the darkness of alcoholic night”—and he kept his word. “The Lord is my shepherd,” he prayed; “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—and they did. The day he was not tempted to drink, which he so fervently anticipated, never came; but the day did come when he could resist the temptation.

Men and women have never withheld their love from the man who rises superior to misfortune. If while rising he fall, they mantle the fall with their compassion. If he have a besetting sin, their interest in him never flags so long as he strives manfully to detach himself from it. “Who,” asks the old monk Thomas à Kempis, “hath a harder battle to fight than he who striveth for self-mastery?” After all, the great victory is to whip the offending Adam out of life, and this Riley proceeded to do, beginning with a strong hand the fall of

1877. Henceforth as hitherto, the people were with him. They gave him freely of their sympathy and love.

It is refreshing to note a cause of the people's sympathy. In those notable years of the seventies, a remarkable man, Robert Collyer, came from his Chicago pulpit to Indiana towns with his lecture on "Clear Grit." Few speakers surpassed him in the power to mould public sentiment. Riley dearly loved him because of his large-hearted incentives. "Collyer had been through the crucible," said Riley. "He knew what it meant to grapple a great temptation by the throat."

"A man may have all sorts of shining qualities," said Collyer in the lecture; "he may be as handsome as Apollo, as plausible as Mercury, and as full of fight as Mars, and yet be a bit of mere shining paste—no diamond at all. On the other hand, a man's faults and failings may be an everlasting regret to those who love him best, as they are in a man like Robert Burns. But because there's Clear Grit in him, because there's a bit of manhood running through his life as grand and good as ever struggled through this world of ours toward a better; a heart that could gather everything that lives within the circle of its mighty sympathy, from a mouse shivering in a furrow, to a saint singing in Heaven; because there's a heart like that in him, we cling to his knees, we will not let him go; sin-smitten, but mighty, manful man, as he is, we gather him into our heart, everyone of us, and love him with an everlasting love."

It was the Burns quality in Riley's songs and the discovery of Clear Grit in his character back there in the latter seventies that endeared him to the people of Indiana. They had found a man who was touched with a feeling for their infirmities. Thus finding him they

were not unmindful of his sorrows. Nor did they disprize his songs because he was the victim of the *blue flame*—

“For his tempted and wandering feet,
Were the songs of David less pure and sweet?”

There was a dragon between the poet and the Golden Fleece but that did not deter him. He would have the Fleece at all hazards and it was this determination that deepened the people's love. They would not “throw away a pineapple because it had a rough coat.” Here and there were friends who had witnessed Riley's rapture after his release from the Beast, as he sometimes called the *blue flame*. The depth of gratitude spiritualized and transfigured in his face was unforgettable. It was evident to them that he had not yielded to the tempter without inwardly protesting against him. “Release from the clutches of the Beast,” Riley once said, “is as sweet to me as the vision of peace to a nation after war. I dreamed once I was a country besieged by a foreign foe. I never could tell when or where the foe would strike, nor could I ever compass his strength. Sometimes I was able to repel him at the first blow; at other times he would march inland and leave desolation and grief in his path before I was able to defeat him and drive him from my kingdom. Not a silly dream either,” he added. “Man enlarged, with his passions, possibilities and perils, is the nation; and the nation diminished is the man.”

The struggles of the poet with adverse fate revealed him a man of uncommon order. They manifested the heroic—endurance of agonies. He had capacities for infinite pain, and, growing out of these, fertility of resources. His “sufferings being of an immortal nature,”

his knowledge of the invisible world—the world so near us we can not comprehend it—his knowledge of that world reached far beyond the ken of average thought, and that meant jewels of song that otherwise had not enhanced the joy of mankind.

The Poe Poem with its numerous complications was succeeded by what Riley called an “era of prosperity,” a period of two years wherein, from the standpoint of pure genius, he did his greatest work. They were the second and third years of his “Prolific Decade.” Including good, bad and indifferent, one thousand poems are credited to his pen. Two hundred of these, together with many sketches in prose, were written the two years following September, 1877. That two-year period of untrammelled endeavor was a heavenly contrast to the ten years of rough traveling that preceded it. He was blessed with the smile of thirty moons, “a total abstinence turnpike,” he phrased it, “which glancing back over he found as true as the sights of a level.”

Riley never credited artificial stimulants with a single poem or story although there were occasional rumors to the contrary. “There is a theory abroad,” said he, “that writers succeed by wooing the means of weakness and debility; as Shakespeare has it, by applying hot and rebellious liquors in their blood. They succeed, *not* by such a course, but in *spite* of it. From ancient times, men have sacrificed mind and money at the shrine of Bacchus; in the phrase of the street, become vassals of King Booze; millions have gone down to defeat; others, some of them great and mighty men, have fought and won their way to fame. They did not win because of drink but in spite of it. Rum does, strangely enough,

lubricate the grooves of life, and under its gloze the world of care becomes a harmless jest, but nothing worth saving was ever written then. A maudlin effort is always a weak effort. I can imagine a poet under the pretense of intoxication, reeling to the door of a friend at midnight. After being admitted and pitied, I hear him say, 'Give me some paper—I want to write a poem.' The next morning the friend relates the incident to his neighbors and says the fellow wrote 'Bells Jangled.' He had not done so. The pretender had thought on the poem for two weeks and had every line of it at his command when he entered his friend's house. Some authors think it an honor to have the fame of writing under the influence of wine. I want no such reputation. A man must be in his right mind if he writes poetry worth reading. Once in Indianapolis there lived a poet who was always posing as one who wrote poetry on the spur of the moment. It was not true. Previously he had worked for days on a poem which his idolaters supposed he wrote at a desk in ten minutes while they looked on in open-eyed wonder."

"When you reckon up nature," Myron Reed once said to Riley, "it is not fair to take one side only, and add together June mornings, and bird songs, and rainbows, and the gladness of the grass and grain. There is another very serious set of items that must come in somewhere. The air of the June morning that plumes the feathers of the robin may be twisted before night into a cyclone. We are in a world where the devil, mountain lions and silver-tipped bears are loose. Our enemies are not in a cage. Pleasant it is to see the sun, pleasant to lean out of your window on moonlight nights to hear the bugle and listen to 'The Campbells Are Coming'; but to be a Camp-

bell in a pair of wet horse-hide boots wrinkled at the ankles—that is different. It is a slow process,” concluded Reed, smiling at Riley’s dream of spotless deportment, “a slow process training a river, a tiger and a man. There is the inclination to return to the old way.” Mark Twain had said, “Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed down stairs a step at a time.”

It was a slow process—the formation of character. Resolutions were necessary to that end, and back there in the fall of 1877 Riley made some. He got a cue from the saying of a wise old Indianapolis lawyer, Calvin Fletcher, who had also been a successful farmer, banker and railroad promoter. “If I have business relations with a man,” said the lawyer, “and he gets angry at me or does not act right, *it is my fault*. My business is to see that everybody with whom I deal shall do right. I charge myself with the responsibility.” Riley promptly saw the wisdom of the lawyer’s course. If I am not upright in thought and conduct, he reasoned, it is my fault. If I do not have friends and health it is my fault. If others do not love me it is my fault. If the critics do not praise my poems, if I do not reach the goal, it is my fault. Thus he made a map of the country through which he was to travel, put up guide-posts, all pointing to a rosy triumph. And it was good for him to do so, although he did not always travel in the forward direction. From his youth he had had a sharp eye for *outward* things, but he had been a hazy student of himself. Now, however, self-study became an absorbing subject, the unlocking of hidden faculties, the searching analysis of his powers and their relation to the place he was to occupy in the world. Knowledge of all men

meant, *first*, self-knowledge; the control of others, self-control, and so forth.

"Are there not some exceptions to this doctrine of personal responsibility?" asked a reporter some years after Riley had made his resolution. "Exceptions? Lord, no!" was the prompt reply. "It will work all the way up the scale. If I am not President of the United States, it is my fault." There were some exceptions but the conquering spirit of YOUTH in the poet would not tolerate them.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson that Riley learned from the Poe-Poem experience was the wise construction he put on the use of adversity. "If some misfortune can befall him—all will be well." This seems a heartless remark and some can not forgive Emerson for making it. Riley saw wisdom in it. Through the mist of tears he perceived that the ugly and venomous toad we call adversity does truly wear a precious jewel in its head. There *was* such a thing as thriving on misfortune. "By going wrong things had come right." A friend wrote to ask if he was discouraged over the "Leonainie Downfall."

"Discouraged? God bless you, no," was the homely reply. "It has fattened me like a Thanksgiving turkey."

Now that he has surmounted what for a while seemed an insurmountable obstacle, it may be said in the true sense of the word that Riley was a poet. He had a new conception of his mission. Since his *vision*, his attitude had been that of a listener. "In hours of inspiration," he said, "I was a lover listening to an utterance that flowed in syllables like dewdrops from the lips of flowers." The listening attitude was to continue, but he was not only to *listen*, he was to

work. It was one thing to be favored with the syllables, another and equally important thing to seize them and record them. They had to be caressed and polished and occasionally hammered that the reader might have, in a measure, the sense of beauty that ravished the poet's heart when he first heard them. After the syllables had been recorded he had to set the poem up, and then "walk around it," he said, "as Benjamin Harrison walked around a law case." Of a poem that had required a day and a night's effort he remarked, "you can track me round it a hundred times." Poems were his children—good—bad—indifferent. To curb, train and direct them demanded the patience of an educator. When in a jocular mood Riley was wont to call an unfinished poem a "Cairawan." At such times he would play the Dwarf in *Christmas Stories* to perfection: "Ladies and Gentlemen," he would say when taking leave of friends to work on a poem, "the Little Man will now walk three times around the Cairawan and retire behind the curtain." Thus he sometimes uttered the words on entering his room at night. The next morning there would be a new poem on his table.

And here also the reader comes to the exit of the Little Man in this volume. Having been before the footlights for a season—not from any wish of his own but in response to the call of his friends—he looks back a moment on the rare pictures of his boyhood and forward for a glimpse of his future and then makes his bow and retires behind the curtain.

It is the first year of his "Prolific Decade" and the last day of the year—1877. The Little Man is twenty-eight years old. As his favorite Ik Marvel wrote, "Clouds were weaving the summer into the season of

autumn; and YOUTH was rising from dashed hopes into the stature of a man." There being little doubt among his friends, less in himself, and none in the mind of the Calm Angel, that he is a poet, he settles down to his work in Greenfield. The "wanderlust" calls to him in vain. The past with its cloud and sunshine is like a story. In a way, it seems years back to his *vision* although it is less than twenty moons. It was a long way back to the old County Court House with its Township Library, and the Shoe-Shop where he received his first impulse to a literary life—farther yet back to the little willow brook of rhymes that warbled through his native town, a score and more years back to the day in childhood when he and his Uncle Mart ascended the stream and lifted the curtains on its winding scenery—a long, tortuous way it was back to these mile-stones.

At last he has fairly set sail on a literary sea, and for him that sea has the charms that envelop the mariner on his first voyage to foreign lands. Sky and atmosphere are brimmed and overflowing. All things are elate with buoyancy. There is the breath of morning in the sea air. Before him in the hazy kingdoms of the unknown are the Fortunate Isles and somewhere beyond them—

"The shores of an eternity
In the calms of Paradise."

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